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ROBERT BLAKE OF RINGWOOD.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

"COME LIKE SHADOWS, SO DEPART."



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ROBERT BLAKE OF RINGWOOD.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CURTIUS LEAPS INTO THE GULF.

WHEREFORE weary the patience of our readers with what "An' it is to be told it were well it were told quickly."

This is a truth incontrovertible, and has no other than our great Shakspeare for its authority, who, though he applied it to doing instead of talking, or telling rather, nevertheless intended it for universal application.

And so considered the two personages of

our drama immediately before the curtain, it seemed to have been written especially for their instruction at this difficult moment of their lives; they decided to act strictly in accordance with the letter of the original text, and since they were to be "done for," that is married, they were well it were "done for" quickly.

Mr. Blake and Mrs. Forster were neither of them what may be termed young people; they had both gone through the ordeal before, and so knew what it was, and would rejoice to have it over.

They, in their own opinion, were two sensible old people, arrived at years of discretion—a long preamble in their case would be absurd! To behave like romantic young lovers! Ridiculous!

Mrs. Forster was especially reasonable. She was a widow, and the romance of youth over with her, might be one reason, for she did not raise insurmountable obstacles to his proposal of an early union, nor offer one "shilly-

shally' more than was absolutely necessary. "Aunt Sallys" we may style them, since what were they put up for but to be knocked down?

It was further resolved, as most suitable to their position, that the ceremony should take place somewhere else than at Ringwood.

They had no disposition to exhibit themselves for the amusement of their neighbours, as public specimens of the fallibility of human nature, flying in the face of their antecedents, forswearing their faith, on Mr. Blake's part, at any rate, proving his friends false prophets, who had devoutly believed and pronounced that "he would never marry again."

Mrs. Forster's friends had not been quite so positive in their opinion of her constancy, so there would be less surprise on that score. But then it was the wrong person, not the one set down for her.

So it was settled to make short work of it, and that with as little stir as possible, whatever the large world of Ringwood might

deduce from the gossiping of servants and the babble of gossips—and where does such not exist? Yet it should know nothing for certain till the deed was done, when it would find it convenient to put surprise in its pocket, and prophecy after the event, that they knew from the first, that nothing else could come of the intimate relations subsisting between the great house and the little house.

As if to smooth the way as much as possible, it so happened that the Davonports lived in London; Mrs. Davonport was Mabel's sister, she and the little one were flourishing surprisingly by this time, and making public exhibitions of themselves fearlessly. Mabel, therefore, wrote to her sister, claiming her hospitality for a few days, hinting a secret, to be imparted to her private ear when she should see her.

Mrs. Marshall was not at this time with her daughter (Mrs. Davonport); the fatigue and anxiety attendant on her motherly care of "dear Adela" had been too much for her,

and she had gone to Brighton on a recruiting expedition.

This was *her* rendering of facts.

The other side told a much more deplorable tale.

Facts are stubborn things, and will speak for themselves.

We grieve to shock the good opinion our readers may have entertained of that amiable lady when we state that such devotion had not been all voluntary, nor was it her will, either, that society at Ringwood should be so long ungraced by her presence.

She did it because she could not help it.

The fact was, she had been made fast prisoner by untoward Fate, in the likeness of her face ; for it was this, and none other, that turned the key on her, and made her invisible to her world of friends.

Her poor face was frightfully inflamed and swollen. Not the expansion due to the smart of our teeth cutting us, rendering us equally objects of fright and pity.

Mr. Davonport, her affectionate son-in-law, declared she looked like the "Red Lion at Brentford," and as fierce too.

The lady laid the mischief at her new-born grandson's door. Owing to him the nursery fire had scalded her face

"Her complexion never could stand the fire!"

Mr. Davonport, a humorous man, would whisper slyly to his wife, "For complexion, read rouge."

This was at other times ; but now, sponsor for his little son, by reason of his tender years—days, properly speaking—it behoved him to stand up and clear the character of the little stranger, an infant prodigy certainly, but not an Erostratus yet, setting fire to his grandmamma's face, the temple of *her* worship.

His papa, therefore, speaking for him, since he could not speak for himself, set forth the fiery apparition as consequent on the attempted process of enamelling, with which the

lady sought to repair the ravages of time, hiding him, Cupid-wise, behind a mask.

Mr. Davonport further set forth that he had himself seen his worthy mamma-in-law enter a certain emporium of artifices, where complexions, and everything pertaining to facial disguises, &c., could be had for the asking and ---paying!

Mr. Davonport loved a joke, and jocosely termed all that about the nursery fire---humbug! His mamma-in-law an old---goose will do. Beauty-marts---an invention of the Evil One; and his darling little son the most wonderful baby that ever was born.

To appear in the presence of the man for whose fascination she was working away at a prodigious rate was impossible, with a countenance that looked as if she had been rubbing it with a brass candlestick with a vengeance. She, who as a girl was nowhere, did a speck mar the perfection of a skin, which it very often did, despite her pains, how much less

now, when youth was no longer hers as a counterpoise.

So you see the girl was the mother of the woman.

But it is more than probable that had she known what was going on in her absence at the Rookery, face or no face, she would have taken the next train, and presented herself to the astonished pair, with all her blushing honours thick upon her.

Robert went up to London some days before his intended bride, having many important affairs to transact, consequent on the change of his condition.

To do him justice, he thought it would be better for Sybil that it should take place soon. He loved her tenderly, he was touched by her devotion, her clinging to him through all, her self-command, that after the first painful outbreak she had so subdued self, that not even to his loving eyes had a shadow of reproach or rebellion been perceptible.

Still feeling all this, his love was so different, he could not have sacrificed Mabel to her, though like many another father, he would have given his life in defence of his child.

He knew that the most trying moment to her was yet to come, and he wished to spare her the useless pain of witnessing the preparations, knowing well that we adapt ourselves to circumstances easier in fact than in theory.

It was this as much as anything that made him determine on Town as the scene of his revival, and told her therefore shortly before, that he was going up on business matters. He would be away from her for a time; was there anyone she would wish to go and stay with during his absence, or if preferring to remain at Ringwood, whom would she like to keep her company?

She guessed directly, and turned pale, but the next instant she was herself, smiling and telling him she would stop and take care of

the house; the good people of Ringwood were all kind to her. She had no wish for company, but if he would feel more satisfied, Aunt Cassandra, she knew, would come and look after her.

He told her to do so; he would give her *carte-blanche* to do or go wherever she wished.

To London therefore he went to seek counsel's assistance as to settlements, procure his special licence, and make ready everything that could conduce to the comfort and pleasure of his Intended, all with a thoughtful care and devotion, that she would have looked for in vain at any other hand, not a woman's, certainly—scarcely her own, careful as it was to the ministering of the vanities of her own selfish self.

Her arrival in London took place some few days before the wedding: He was in waiting to receive her at the terminus, counting the moments, anticipating accidents, and resolving not to outlive her, did fate snatch her from him.

Even she, "albeit unused to the melting mood," was touched by the warmth of his greeting, and felt a sort of awe at the moral grandeur of the man who had chosen her from among many, and was as incomparably superior to her in all things as is the sun to the planets.

Mabel and her lover took coach and drove to the Davonports.

Mr. Blake was not unknown to them, they having met at Ringwood, and in Town during his stay there a month or two back, and much they esteemed him.

On reading Mabel's letter, they divined the 'secret' to be of the masculine gender, and on seeing a gentleman with her, assurance was made doubly sure, and the gentleman declared to be, *le preux chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*, an acquisition to any family.

Mrs. Forster said, that in it all there was but one drawback—the absence of 'dear mamma,' whom she had fully expected to have seen waiting for her at the station ! She

could not understand it, having written to inform her of her happy prospects, and neither to hear from, or see anything of her, was unaccountable! Turning to her sister—

“No. 99, Nosuch Street, Brighton! wasn’t it, dear?”

“9, Somesuch Street! you silly thing!” answers the sister.

“Now that accounts for it,” says Mabel, in innocent surprise. “To think of my making such a mistake! How could I be so careless?”

“Very easily!” says Mr. Davonport, silyly. “You look dreadfully done up about it, certainly!”

“Go! you good-for-nothing man!” returned his sister-in-law. “Your heavy responsibilities will not cure you of quizzing! There must be a budget of my letters somewhere!”

“Shall I make enquiries about them?” said he, significantly.

Mrs. Forster coloured perceptibly, and darted a hasty glance towards Robert, but he

was in conversation with Mrs. Davonport, the little girl of the family on his knee.

"Thanks," returned she, promptly, "I can do that for myself; but what a man you are not to show me your son and heir; I don't believe you care about him!"

"Tell that to the marines!" said he, laughing. "Come and see."

And he led the way to the room where swathed, if not exactly in purple, yet in fine linen, reigned despotically the master of the house, making slaves of papa and mamma, and every one in it; whose smallest signal of distress, no matter the hour, day or night, was attended with a rush to the lifeboat to rescue the precious little ship from supposed danger.

"There he is," says the admiring father, surveying him with intense satisfaction. "I defy you to match him. The rogue knows me already," as the wondering eyes turned in his direction.

Mabel regarded the child in silence.

"You unconscionable little rascal to be such a size," he went on. "Nurse says he is

the finest of three hundred, whom she has done duty for."

"Yes, indeed," answers nurse; "you should feel the weight o' him *Miss* (Mabel), he'll need strong arms to nuss him bye-and-bye."

"He shall have his father's; shan't you, my boy?"

He smiled and pinched the downy little cheek, and then turned to Mabel, wondering at her indifference.

She was weeping genuine tears, that overflowed their cisterns this time.

The father's heart took alarm.

"You don't see anything wrong about him?" said he, anxiously.

"No, no," she answered; "he is a beautiful little fellow. I was thinking of the past, of my own poor little baby."

He was a keen lawyer and judge of character, and read his sister-in-law's to the letter. He doubted her always, but not now, and he was moved.

"True," said he, with much feeling; "I

did not think of that. Adela (his wife) has often told me of it."

"He would have been nine years old now," she pathetically murmured.

"Come down, my dear," said he, tenderly; "you are fatigued with your long journey, and stand in need of refreshment," and he gave her his arm.

"Oh! he was such a pretty little fellow; just like your dear little son."

"Was he so old as that?"

"Oh! no; he only lived an hour."

"That was hard. I did not know he lived at all."

"Yes, that time; and then I was desolate indeed."

Mr. Davonport was so moved at the feeling she exhibited that he could not answer, and felt more her friend than he ever thought he should.

During the few days preceding her marriage she was much less artificial, taking to the baby with inordinate affection for her,

and endearing herself to them all by a softness and sensibility they had never suspected in her.


They had pitied poor Sybil at first, now they pitied Mabel at having a grown up girl for her step-daughter.

But she spoke affectionately of her, and Robert, in the tender reliance of her manner towards himself, felt for her a love that bordered on adoration.

She wrote a very different letter to her mother to what she would have done some days previously, and said not one word about the missing links of her correspondence. Her letter ran as follows :—

“MY DEAR MAMMA,

“I petitioned Adela to say nothing when she wrote to you about what I have to communicate, as I wished to be myself the first to tell you that I am going to change my name. Mr. Blake has asked me to marry him, and I have consented.



I know, darling mother, that you had other views for me; but I know, too, that you, in common with everyone else, had a great admiration for this one, and will own that I could not do better. I hate that expression! It is so vulgar and worldly-minded! He is so good, so amiable, and devoted, that at this moment I feel nothing but shame that I am so unworthy of him. I feel sure I shall be happy with him; I never should be so with Mr. Church, whom you fixed upon for me. The one, Robert, draws out what little good is in me; the other what is bad. He is too much like myself, less lovable than attractive. He is too exigent, and places his standard of excellence in women so high that I do not believe he will ever find one to suit him.

“I hope you will approve; I know that none can love me like you. Do come up on receipt of this, and give me your blessing! The event is coming off next Tuesday; we have made short work of it. It is all your

doing. Why did you go away and leave your poor solitary rook a mark for any wicked sportsman to point his gun at?

“Come! do come! I could not be happy if I did not see your dear face among those I love best. John and Adela are perfect angels, and baby is a Cupid. He is going to give me away,—not baby, Cupid will do for the occasion, but it is not him, but John, who is mad about his boy, and no wonder. It will be a dreadfully slow affair; a penny wedding would have more romance. You! Adela, Adela, No. 2. A two-year old bridesmaid! for I have no other, and one or two others just to swear by. Tea and cake all there will be for breakfast. I must not forget to send the Goodbye a piece of this last; she is fond of plum-cake—it will do for her to put under her pillow, and dream that she is Robert’s No. 3! I must tell you that when I see you, which I hope will be to-morrow, and so does Robert, who longs to kiss your fair hand.

"Trusting that your face has quite recovered its good looks,

"I remain, darling mother,

"Your loving and dutiful daughter,

"MABEL."

Mrs. Marshall's answer was somewhat startling.

"MABEL!" it began.

"I wonder at your impertinence in sending me such a piece of trash as your letter! You have made me do what I never believed I should live to do—wish that your poor dear father was back again in this wicked, wicked world. Till now I have always thought it a blessed release for both of us, for certainly he had a most trying temper to live with. What do you suppose he thinks of your conduct to his poor disconsolate widow, your mother? Do you believe he would suffer it if he was alive? You are behaving shamefully, you know, to Mr. Church, to whom you are engaged;

but that is nothing to your conduct to me, whom you know also was as good as engaged to that wretched old man, whose imbecility you have taken advantage of, inveigled him into marrying you, and so jilted your unfortunate mother. Not that I cared for him, or would have had him, but from motives of charity. The old flirt, going about making love to every woman he comes near, and ending by making a fool of himself, and marrying a woman scarce older than his daughter. Does he think he will ever live to see his children grow up! Seventy years of age! Don't tell me he is not! I know better! I see it in every line of his withered old face! What he wants is a nurse; or, if he will make himself a laughing stock, and take a wife, there are plenty of women in the world more suitable to his great age, who as handsome, and as young-looking as yourself—younger looking—who do not look thirty, which you do Mabel! who would have reflected credit on his taste and good sense, have graced the

head of his table, and proved a mother to his poor motherless girl, whose fate I shudder to think of.

“Don't fancy I shall sanction with my presence this most absurd and contemptible marriage; from this moment I disown you, I no longer consider you as my daughter, and will never again set foot in those doors, which are alone the cause of your selling yourself as you are doing. Were you not my child, I would make the ridiculous old dotard account for his heartless conduct to me in a court of justice; I have sufficient for a ‘Breach of Promise’ case, damages £10,000. So you have cheated me every way; but I scorn him, the poor old gaby, who having lived his three score years and ten, remains a miserable spectacle of what the sere and yellow leaf can come to.

“I say no more! I leave it to Mr. Church to visit you both with just retribution, and to the stings of your own conscience, which must be dead indeed if it does not taunt you.

with your base ingratitude to your indulgent
and tenderly affectionate mother,

“ CLEMENTINA MARSHALL.”

P.S.—I have one request to make, the last
you ever will have from me, and that is, that you
leave the key of my apartment at Ringwood
with Adela. I suppose that you have obeyed
my injunction, as to keeping it always in
your pocket, and never letting it out of your
sight a moment ; not that anything you do
or don't do will surprise me after your strange
and unaccountable conduct in marrying again.
My only anxiety is as regards that foolish
creature, Mary Lynes, who is a pet of yours,
and a striking instance of your total disregard
of your parent's wishes. Granted that she is,
as you say, honest, and trustworthy, and wil-
ling, and clean, she is, I tell you as a set-off,
the ugliest thing you will see in a day's walk,
and as vain of herself, too! She is always
peeping and prying into everything. I declare
I cannot open my dressing case when she is

in it—in the room I mean. You should see her staring with all her eyes! I know she has false keys, for I often wonder what is the matter with the lock when I can't open it. I will say this for her, she has the good sense to admire me, and so forsooth takes me for her model, copies my trimmings, and makes up her coarse things like mine. I know she would try on my bonnets, too, if I left them out an instant. You know I was told of her going out of a Sunday in a blue silk dress, black lace mantle — imitation, of course, unless she got hold of mine—and a white chip bonnet, with lilies of the valley in it, fall, and blue silk parasol—lined, actually! Was there ever such a piece of effrontery? What has the world come to? Daughters marrying so disgracefully, and servants dressing themselves like their mistresses, so that there is no telling the difference. All I say is, look at their feet! Splay! every one of them. Not that this is a sure sign, for yours, Mabel, are remarkably large. You do not inherit that misfortune from me; that came through your

poor dear father, whose family had feet like elephants. Mine are excessively small, one blessing, no one can stand in my shoes. But what I am apprehensive about is, that I may have left out some of the enamels and paints, *that I use in my illumination*, and the poor vain creature may fancy they are intended to beautify her ugly face, and at this moment may be going about a ridiculous object, fit only for a guy on the fifth of November. She is quite capable of it, for just before I left I went to her room to call her ; she was out, so I stepped into it to look for what I wanted—it was very neat, as you say, but there on the table stood a pot marked ‘bear’s-grease,’ smelling of onions so horribly, that I nearly ran out of the room, a sign she made it herself, for I never heard of bears eating onions. Then there was a bottle of something I took for elder-flower water, made out of the garden no doubt, and this is how she wastes her, or or rather your time. This was not all, there was powder, and a piece of pink soap on her wash-stand ; and would you credit it ? a case

actually on her table, and on opening it, there was the likeness of a young man as ugly as herself, and something like her too. She would tell you it was her brother. False! As if such scrubs could have any natural affection! I was so overcome at the depravity of servants in this age, that I nearly forgot where I was, and had to hurry out, for I heard her coming, and she might have had the impudence to suppose that I was peeping and prying about her room, indeed! One extraordinary inconsistency struck me: there was an illuminated text over the chimney-piece, 'Teach me to do Thy will!' as if painting and plastering her face, and dressing herself in a blue silk dress, black lace mantle, white chip bonnet with lilies of the valley, fall, and lined blue silk parasol was doing it! Horrible!

"I have written a longer postscript than I intended, but as it is the last you will have from me, you may set store by it.

"C. M."

Mrs. Forster did not show her mother's letter to her Intended, to whom it was not flattering, though we question whether he would not have enjoyed the photograph of himself more than any one.

Mr. Davonport denominated it as the richest piece of twaddle that had come under his notice, and said he should set upon her to bring the action for "breach of promise," and give him the case.

Mabel made out her case respecting Mr. Church satisfactorily, and being, as we say, unusually tender hearted, was more inclined to cry than to laugh at her mother's displeasure, while her sister, happiness itself, laughed more than she cried, and promised her that she and "John" would do all they could to bring mamma round, baby being the powerful medium.

"Cupid! as Mabel calls him in his innocenceship," answers Mr. Davonport. "He shall hunt up another *caro sposo* to console her."

The marriage took place in a dear little church a few miles from town. The ruthless hand of modern barbarism has not yet sacrificed this solemn relic of the past to the meretricious taste of a vitiated age; simple and serene, with its lime-trellised approach, it stands casting its sacred shade over the silent resting place of former votaries, and could aught of consolation be received for the rendering up of a sentient existence, it would be that our dreamless sleep should pass in this same sweet sequestered spot, apart, yet not hidden away, the dead among the living, the living among the dead, the thousand tongues of profuse and harmonious Nature our *requiem*, the thousand eyes of Heaven our watch till the awakening.

Our couple could scarcely have desired fairer auspices; a day tranquil and Heavenly, a holy calm pervading the air, the varied perfumes of the beautiful summer filling it to repletion.

If there were few to admire, there were still

fewer to criticise, none to carry home for general entertainment a living scrap-book of "guys and quizzes," and none to cast beneath unhallowed tread the beauteous offspring of the flowering earth, crushed, mangled, a holocaust of mud and dirt.

It must not be imagined that Mr. Blake was unmindful of his daughter at this time. It was as much for her sake, as his own, that he desired the proceeding should be as quiet and as distant from home as possible; he had too much consideration for her to tax her unnecessarily, and he did not second his Mabel's entreaty, that "dear Sybil" should be present at the ceremony. "She would scarce feel easy, or believe that she (Sybil) was friendly disposed towards her, if she did not see something of her that day."

Powerful as her influence was, it had its limits, and she failed in her application; he could not leave her to find her way home solitary, she who had scarce left his protecting care for years.

During his stay in London, he made more than one excursion to Ringwood to look after her welfare ; the last was a day or two before the wedding, to arrange for her during his absence.

He did not mention the subject to her, nor did she moot it to any one either, but the instinct given us as to motive powers in those with whom we are in immediate contact, told her the whole as clearly as though conveyed by word of mouth.

From the moment of her father's departure she knew it to be the forerunner of things about to come to pass ; from the moment of Mrs. Foster's leaving, she knew they were at hand, and prepared herself to meet the trial, and a bitter one to her it assuredly was.

At first consolation came not, even with her earnest supplication for it, but in the resignation of herself to His Holy Will, strength came at last.

On this last visit, the Monitor whispered her that it was the last of their old life, no

more would it be as heretofore, her kingdom ; her little kingdom was now taken from her, and her place would know her no more.

But God was with her. His arm would support her. His love keep her. She was His, and His only. None other could come between them. There was a time when one image filled her heart to the exclusion of all others ; that had deserted its shrine, the lamp of her earthly love was extinguished, never to be rekindled. She had turned to her father, he too left her ; everything of earth failed her ; there was nothing true but God.

She met her father with cheerfulness and smiles, and plied her needle to complete a pair of braces, which, if the truth must be told, had been very long in the manufacture of, to the sly amusement of papa, who certainly never dreamed any more than herself the occasion for which they were destined ; she had resolved he should not forget her on the auspicious morning, and had worked early and late in order to finish them.

Mr. Blake watched the play of her busy little fingers, and looked on her with tender compassion for her hard fate as a woman, weak, dependent, and sensitive, exposed to greater evils than men, because of her inferior position to his, and without his strength to rise above her drawbacks, and assert herself.

He reasoned as a man, and did not perceive that under the softness of exterior seeming, lay a force of character, an endurance, a resolution, and grandeur of thought and feeling, that beat his arguments hollow.

Mr. Blake might have been pardoned had he found this evening dull, after those passed in the society of his charmer. But he did not ; Sybil was all gentleness and attention, and looked so heavenly in her beauty and innocence, that he sat revolving in his mind as to what flower he should compare her.

She was too dark for a lily, too splendid for the violet, and after calling up the flowers he could remember, rejected them all for that commonest of all similies, the rose.

“Why?” if asked, he would have answered
“because of its thorns.”

Then he thought of a flower for Mabel, and tulips, and tulips only presented themselves for prototypes.

He laughed at the thought, and Sybil joined in it for sympathy's sake, for she could not for her life have told what she was laughing at.

The next day was one of exceeding occupation, he had so much to look to, so many directions to give. Sybil knew it all, but her spirits never flagged; he was to leave by the afternoon express.

The braces were completed and put into his hand with strict injunction as to the wearing of them, answered by promises made to be, and that were fulfilled.

Miss Nugent was to come the same evening; she was so angry with him that she would not make her appearance while there was the least probability of meeting him: To congratulate or wish him happiness, she could not, and would not.

The moment of parting was felt by both ; he sent his luggage on to the station, having a call to make on his way ; he preferred to walk the half-mile further.

He would not hear of Sybil's accompanying him, for he could not bear to think of her returning by herself, nor even let her come beyond the door, where, after many charges to take care of herself, to consider everything as her own, and promising a letter every day, he departed.

He had not gone far when he felt, as he thought, someone touch him on the shoulder ; he turned quickly round, no one was there, only on the ground lay a little white silk slipper of his dear Sybil's, she was standing on the hall steps laughing.

He picked it up, pressed it to his lips, and then placed it in his breast : As he did so, two loving arms were thrown round his neck, and a voice was saying tenderly, " May you be very, very happy, dear papa."

The slipper was in his breast, and the

image of his child, as she flew down the steps towards him, in his eyes, even at the absorbing moment which separated him from her, and gave his honour and happiness into the keeping of another.

END OF PART II.

PART III.

CHAPTER XXV.

"THE FLOWER AND THE LEAF."

"THE HALL," where our friends the Bertrams held sway, was situated at the further end of Ringwood, that and the residence of the Blakes being the extremes nearly of the parish. As we have elsewhere stated, they were classed among the "Upper Ten Thousand" of its society, scarce giving precedence to the great people of Ringwood Place, who visited their seat, and gave Ringwood itself the benefit of their patronage just two months out of the twelve.

Whoever the Bertrams did or did not visit, it is a fact that they never made any interchange of civilities with the people of the new order at "Ringwood."

With the old it had been different; equal to themselves in station and influence, the two families were sworn allies. In olden times there had been intermarriages, and it was therefore but natural that the Bertrams should make common cause against the usurpers, count the injuries of the proscribed as their own, and steadily persist in holding no communication with their enemies.

The dignified reserve Sybil resolved to maintain towards Mr. Bertram, should they ever again meet—her determination never, on any account, to turn her eyes in his direction—were put to flight the first time she saw him on their return. But the months since had been so full of import and occupation that, after his first look of genuine admiration as he met her driving her ponies, had convinced her that the sin she had committed of smiling

on him unauthorised had been absolved, she thought no more of him, nor once imagined that those very frequent appearances of his, either on horse or foot, his custom of turning in a contrary direction to his house and take hers on leaving church, could have the least reference to herself, or had any signification in it whatever.

Sybil having taken her stand upon that rock against which, though the wind and waves may beat, yet they cannot prevail, found the battle of life, which must be fought out, save for a few chafes and bruises, powerless to harm her.

The sweetness with which she bore her cross, her father's marriage, a heavy one to her, her cheerfulness and submission, her reliance on her friends, that they would not fail her in the downfall of her good prospects, worked its way.

The world is not entirely made up of selfishness. Virtue and truth and genius find their supporters, staunch, stedfast to the death, and will carry the day against their antagonists,

though not clad in the tinsel trappings of mammon, nor yet in rags, a condition indispensable to their existence, according to many theorists, but which, with all due deference, one is much inclined to question. Hunger and cold, weariness, privation, and misery, are not favourable to the development of the virtues, and were we in the possession of these said incentives, we doubt being any more virtuous than those who are, especially if ignorance be added thereto.

Mr. Blake and his bride gave themselves some six weeks to do the moon of moons in, which they did not find made of green cheese, but of honey.

Strange to tell, it did not seem to them farther removed than Switzerland. But time and distance, on such journeys as these, are not measurable: Was the dog-star the hymeneal vogue—to which, by-the-bye, many do take the trip on these and other occasions, we question its appearing any way more remote to the beatified tourists.

During their absence society at Ringwood

took note of the fair warden of "Ringwood," acting in that capacity while her father was away on this same mooning expedition.

Sybil's duties, however, were more honorary than arbitrary. Outside positions were reversed; she became a magnet, "droring," as that important functionary of her culinary department, her cook, designated it, as much by the grace of her manners, which foreign travel had perfected, as by the beauty which captivated with irresistible power.

She wrote many lively letters both to her father and to Mabel, detailing the doings of herself and her aunt, and the gay lives they were leading.

The former rejoiced to find that she was neither solitary nor deserted; but nothing, perhaps, could have gratified him more than to learn of the visit of the Bertrams, brother and sister, presenting a flag of truce and praying for a cessation of hostilities.

Mr. Blake thought he surmised the cause, and regarded it as earnest of his dear daughter's future prospects of happiness.

Sybil herself was too modest to place it to her own account ; knowing little of the history of the past, she took it as a matter of course that people would visit them more now their stay at Ringwood was assured, yet even in her eyes some interest more than common attached itself to these persons, and one slight circumstance gave at least one of them a charm wanting, she thought, in every other person.

Mr. Bertram did not in a single instance resemble the man who had won her heart abroad, though both were handsome, both the perfect gentleman, equally honourable certainly, equally acquisitions to the circles in which they moved ; yet were they totally dissimilar in all things save one, and even this was different, still it seemed a link to the past, and made her more desirous to count them as her friends, and be so accounted by them.

Miss Nugent would not hear of waiting the return of the travellers before acknowledging this visit, and in reasonable time, took her niece, resolved to do what she could for her, while it lay in her power.

They found both Mr. and Miss Bertram within, and the friendly feelings which moved them to make the acquaintance was certainly not diminished on this second interview.

Before leaving, a walk was proposed in the garden, the fine old place being alike interesting for its beauty and the historic association connected with it.

Of course it is to be expected that, following the order of things, the young man would appropriate to himself the pleasant task of escorting the younger lady.

His sister and Cassandra followed, that is as well as they could, but it was not always possible, as the two would turn short into some shrubbery, or else disappear in some magical way, and when again on the field of view, were deep in discussion on an extensive prospect, or all among the roses, which she admiring, he was gathering, thinking, with the gallantry of his sex, herself the fairest of them all.

He chose topics of conversation he deemed

most agreeable to her, especially her travels abroad. On these she could converse, and certain of a listener who knew nothing of her foreign life, spoke with the vivacity natural to her when her feelings were interested.

He too had travelled, and shared her enthusiasm in the quiet way especial to Englishmen, but he did not admire Sybil the less for being endowed with more of sensibility than is usual with her countrywomen ; not that she was exuberant or gushing—she was soft and considerate, lively and natural.

To his question as to which place she remembered with most pleasure, she answered Italy, though she liked the French people best.

“ Did you take Trieste in your wanderings ? ” he asked cursorily.

At the name her dark southern beauty became overspread as with the crimson sunset of warmer skies, and she buried her face in the “ Rohan ” rose, which he presented as he asked the question.

But even here was a thorn, and she answered in a low voice, "We were there some months."

"And so was I," he resumed; "it is some years since, but if we put aside the romance associated with Venice, I much prefer Trieste, and passed some pleasant days there."

"So did we," said she very softly. "I shall not soon forget them."

"You must have found Ringwood sombre, after the liveliness of the Continent?"

"I did so at first," she replied, artlessly, "but I am becoming used to it now, the people are so good, and the country most beautiful."

She cast her eyes round on the landscape, beautiful, as she said, the beautiful of English scenery, rich in colour, luxuriant in foliage, softly undulating, while intersecting, the silver stream, winding along through sun and shade, murmuring of its beneficence, a thing of light and life and power, hurrying as the soul to meet its God, the ocean of eternity.

Sybil for a time was lost in contemplation, but the young man's eyes were fixed on her;

recalled from her momentary abstraction, she coloured deeply ; not, however, the conscious blush of love awakened, but the modest one of a sensitive nature.

“How weak of me,” thought she, as they drove home afterwards, she, the graceful whip, the object of secret, her pretty duns of open, admiration, as Mr. Bertram carefully adjusted her in the chaise, and watched her drive away. “How weak of me to be so moved at the mere mention of the place ; what must Mr. Bertram have thought had he seen it? I do not think he did, fortunately, for he was looking straight before him.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CONVERSAZIONE.

MRS. BUTCHER'S party did come off at last, and it really was all the grander for the delay, as it was eventually given in celebration of the event recorded, to wit, the marriage of the master of the house, and to do honour to the occasion, there were many accessories to its splendour, which it would otherwise have been deficient in.

However, justice is ever striving to keep her balance even, albeit in such small matters as Mrs. Butcher's ball; what this gained in

quantity it lost in quality, at least in the good lady's opinion.

"It was not a myster'ous think, done on the sly, but a common public, as any on 'em might ha' done. There wasn't never no guards nor 'scapes, no *claws* whatsomdever."

Mrs. Butcher sported French now and then, but she wasn't perfessed. Not that she would have confessed such. "It was part of her perfession to *parly* French, and she'd l'arnt no end o' "Miss" and Parkes, who was as good a seein' as she war French now," and cook could not boast of "droring" her friends together by her "cunninkly skill," as she termed her culinary one.

To do her justice, she tried sundry manoeuvres, and put out many feelers as to the movements of "Miss," before she would demean herself to ask the favour—"If so be she hadn't no objection to some frien's a-comin' to see her, as ha' been promised times out o' number, nigh upon seven year, but she hadn't never had no means a-deceivin' 'em, seein' as

how she couldn't never do such a think without the askin' o' Miss Sybelses."

Sybil took it in good part, and praised her friends for their patience, and cook for her foresight in waiting seven long years for her return, and she gave her permission to "deceive" her friends, when little by little, with "cunninkly skill," the plan was unfolded, and unkindly enough, cheerfully acceded to.

To this sole cause did Mrs. Butcher attribute the mischances that attended her party, whereas if it had been done *her* way, all would have gone smoothly as a marriage-bell.

"After all, your gran' balls is a deal o' plague, it's a kettle full o' worrits, and never a sprat in it."

This was the conclusion she drew, and imparted to the ladies and gentlemen assembled in her boudoir an evening or two after her fête, who, guests thereat, and having learned etiquette at the upper forms, were rigid observers of its rules. They therefore called

in acknowledgment, and in default of cards, left themselves instead, and passed the evening in social converse, ate and drank up the remains of the feast, a perfect *petit souper*; "a deal more comfortabler nor the other," cook averred, "for there warn't never no gettin' o' things straight, as would go crooked and crookeder, the more as ever you strove the contrary, and though I comports o' my fricassee, as Lazy gi'me, and they all say as it war that becomink, as I looks more of a Queen of Sandwidges nor a cook, yet them as ought to ha' bin droored never droored nigh me, and misfortins as is allers a-comin' in o' your company, and never goes out ag'in, comed in wi' young Chipps, as has bin and walked off wi' my girl, Lazy, as I sha'n't never know what to do wi'out. Law bless you! you doesn't know no more than this here volley how I comports that girl, as is the most willingest and good temperested as ever war. I've teached her well, wi' my scoldin's and bastin's, I promise you. A 'tween you

and me, she can cook better nor many as calls theyselves cooks, which is that hignorant as they couldn't brile you a chop, which a babby could do, no not if they tried ever so. It's me as ha' had the teachin' o' her, and many's the tit-bit as she'll be a-cookin' young Chipps. It's my belief it's that as has made him comport her, for the mens think most o' their eatin' and drinkin', and if so be you wants to find the way to their hearts, you must mind as their plates isn't never empty. Heigho! Why did I make her so becomink? She's out wi' him now."

"If I was you," says Mrs. Armstrong's cook, who had made many efforts to put in a word, "it's more nor I would give up a girl as I couldn't a-spared."

"It's easy a-sayin' so, but you couldn't no more ha' helped yourself nor me. I kep' my eye on her the whole time. 'Lazy,' I says to her, 'if so be as you leaves my side, you sha'n't never no more make me ne'er another fricasy bonnet for my head, no not if you

lives to be old Methusalyman,' and I know'd as she war a gurl as I could trust, and she never leave me, and there she war as busy as a fly in a glue-pot, helpin' me to derange my supper ; and, if you'll believe me, we two was by ourselves, and my eyes was lookin' proud o' my dressin's, when in comes young Chipps, and afore I could open my mouth to say, 'Walk out, sir! you ain't wanted yet!' her two arms was round my waist, and he had gripp'd hold o' my han's, and was a-sayin' 'Say yes! dear, sweet, am'able Mrs. Butcher, as is a-lookin' as han'some as a angel, and is a-givin' of us a supper fit for the Queen on a high-day and a holler-day.' "

"I should ha' said 'No,' for all his palarvy," says her friend, "'I aint a-goin' to put mysel' to no ill-convenience for nayther on you ;" I shouldn't a minded 'em a bit."

"It warn't me as could say that," returns Mrs. Butcher, "me as had got of her fricassee on my head, and her filagree brooch on my neckerty, wi' her two arms round my waist,

and was that dutiful, a deal more dutifuller nor either o' them, my two nieces as I done so much for, and they is going to take the natty little house of Miss Thingimy's, as is dead and gone, and she sets up in the millingry line, and 'Miss,' as allers looked to her, has promised her custom, and a room is to be mine when so be it comports me to come and live with 'em, which is more nor ever I shall do wi' them two hussies o' mine, as has behaved most ongrateful and onbecomink! Afore my very face, Sairey goes and takes up wi' that comportmint o' wanities, young Sadler, as isn't worth a farthink, and Seusan, as I allers thought had more sperrit, and holded of her head above any on 'em, and as I've had a-stayin' wi' me here from week's end to week's end, more nor if she war my darter; she's had the barefacetedness to tell me she's gaged herself to the Imperent, as does the butleerin' at this here house.'

"You doesn't say so!" was the cry in full chorus.

"I made sure as he cast his ship's-eye on you," remarks Mrs. Kitchin.

"Me!" exclaims Mrs. Butcher, justly indignant, "me as is perfessed? Does you think as I was a-goin' to throw myself away on a great low feller like he! Why, I might ha' been a lady, and a-rided in my carridge years and years ago, but I couldn't abide to give up the perfession. (With supreme contempt) —"Him, undeed! Why, the look on him is enough to p'ison you."

"I suppose as all on you'll be a givin' up," observes Mrs. Soper, who, having a daughter in the house, was naturally so very anxious she should give satisfaction that she made daily visits to tell her of her duties, "you'll be a-looking out for yourselves elsewhere, now the new missus is a-comin' into your kitchink."

"That rekires commiseration," answers Mrs. Butcher, "and I ain't a-come to it yet. It's a percarous think to gi' up, where you ha' bin nigh nine year, and drored the fust

saucety round you, all a-lookink and a-lookink up to me, jist as if I war their Queen Victorry (applause). And I can't but say as there's many a 'greablenesses here as you won't git everywhere. Here's my parley—more nor like to a drorin'-room, and where I deceives my frien's, and no missus can't show her face, nor it comports me to let'er. Then the selery is good, not as it's comportable to me as is perfessed, but it's higher nor elsewhere; the Bartramses don't come anigh it, and Miss Bartram is more nor of a old maid as she s pe'tikler, and keeps the keys and her eye on the larder, more nor is rerspecterful; and comes oftener into the kitchink nor is 'greable. Now 'Miss' is more consider'ble that way. I ain't no objectionk percise to oncen a-day, and a wisit in a frien'ly sort o'-way, if so be as some-thinks a-comin' orf; but to have a missus a-comin' in and out, and makin' free wi' your kitchink as if it war her own—I knows better nor to put up wi' it."

Cook's masterly assertion of her freedom was interrupted by thunders of applause; as soon as it had somewhat subsided, the speaker resumed—

"I give up one place atirely as war most serpeerer, all along o' missus a comin' in to my kitchink in that permiscous sort of a way. 'Mum!' says I, one day, as I couldn't stan' it no more, 'jist please for to tell me which on us two bes the missus of this here kitchink; if so be as it's yourn, then I'll jist pick up my comportmints and carry 'em straight into the drorin'-room, where I'll make so bold as to turn the key.' You see I war bilin' hot."

"Very nat'ral," was the approving rejoinder of Mrs. Butcher's friends, discussing the delicacies she dispensed to them.

"The missus biled up at that too," suggests one.

"Not she! She was as coold as a cow-cumber. 'Mrs. Cook,' says she, 'will you please to tell me which of us two is the mis-

tress of this house ? You or I ? If it is you, then I go out of it ; but if it is me, then you walk out of it ; you and your comportments together.’ ”

“ She was a tight hand at the reins,” says coachman.

“ And so war I,” was the majestic answer. “ Mum,” says I, “ if so be as it’s all the same to you, I’ll go now, as you be the missus ; I has a-cousin a-comin’ to fetch me.’ I was that hot, as the water biled out all over me. ‘ All the better,’ says she, aggervatin’ me wi’ her coldness. ‘ Your cousin shall carry away your comportments as well as yourself. I will pay you your wages.’ Acterly a-callin’ of my selery wages, and me perpressed ! ‘ And,’ says she, ‘ if you ever again put your foot into a house that I am mistress of, I will send for another cousin of yours, the policeman, to turn you out of it.’ ”

“ Shame ! Shame ! ” was the unanimous voice.

“ So it was a shame, to talk o’ turnin’ me,

a lady perfessed, out in that jimmy-crack style. Howsomdever, she'd bin a good missus ceptink that, and behave like a lady, a givin' me the month's selery; so I thinks as I packs up my comportmints, and I gets coold down, and she was a-goin' to gi' one o' her gran' parties come two days, and I didn't care to do nothink onhan'some; so I brings down my high haughtys to say, as if so be as she wishes o' me to stay wi' her till after the party, I war 'greable like. Wi' that, she drores up as high as a tree—'Thank you, Mrs. Cook,' says she, 'for your most considerate offer; but I shall find plenty willing to cook my dinner, and if not, I will do it myself; my friends will help me, and the fun will be the best part of it. So leave the house, and don't ask me for a character, unless you wish me to tell of your insolence.' Inserlence, indeed! And me only tellin' o' my rights!"

"And behavin' like a lamb, poor dear!" was the commiserate rejoinder.

"You got the worst!" feelingly remarks that thorn in her side, the lad in the chrysalis state between page and footman.

"I ain't so sure o' that, Mr. Goose, as thinks hisself a swine!" and turning to her friends, "It was long before I got a place as I cared to stay in, and never did till our peoples here come home, and I ain't so young as I war—twenty-five is gittin' in years."

"Aire you twenty-five and raly?" ejaculates the "great low fellow as does the butleerin," with a wink at the company.

He had entered lately, too late to save his character.

"It ain't posserble as you're twenty-five! If I was you, I'd give up the twenty, and say five, and have done with it."

"And where would be the call o' that? who ever heerd of a perfessed five year old?" and she drew up with great dignity.

"I tell you what it is," returns the nephew in perspective, "it's twenty-five years as you've been cookin' since you was born, and

twenty-five years learnin' it before you was born."

"May be so!" says the professor of cookery.

"How many does that make?" asks the "page-boy" as she called him.

"That rekires commiseration," answer the mistified numeralist, "I never war no hand at figgers."

"Fifty!" cries her tormentor in high glee.

"Fifty! I ain't fifty! I ain't no more fifty, nor you're a fifty poun'-note! you're the most imperentest cowboy I ever come nigh!"

Mrs. Butcher killed the cowboy, for such was his early vocation, and like many wiser than he, he was ashamed of his origin.

"I tell you what you've been a doing," says the coachman coming to the rescue, "you've been putting the cart afore the horse, that's what you've been a doing."

"Posserbly I has, but it don't make no difference, do it?"

"Oh no! Not a bit! you only draws backwards instead of forrads. Precious hard

work that! I couldn't get my horses to do it, I know that!"

"There's many a think as neither you nor your horses couldn't comport for all you thinks yoursel's so mighty clever. I should like to see either on you a compositin' o' that there pharisee which you're a shovellin' in, as though it war gold as you couldn't never ha' enough on!" and Mrs. Butcher fairly reduced her rebellious subjects to silence.

CHAPTER XXVII.

“THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL.”—CORREGGIO.

As we have stated, Sybil was neither neglected nor unhappy during the absence of her father, and would have been perfectly content, but for two drawbacks, and one of these was Mr. Church.

He had returned from his tour on the Continent, improved neither in health nor spirits to judge by appearances.

Though he might be wanting in that softness of manner, that amiability, that christian charity towards the feelings of less strong

minded individuals, Sybil had not, certainly, disliked him ; she attributed his superciliousness and frigidity to pride, the Englishman's pride, detracting very often from other most estimable qualities, and stigmatising him as narrow-minded and selfish.

During her teens, Sybil had had more than her share of incense offered at her shrine. Abroad, it was on the part of the *preux chevaliers*, accompanied by a devotion, an abandon, a total prostration of self, in the fulness of homage, that made the less demonstrative form of worship in our colder clime appear cold and inane.

Our heroine was far from feeling the change ; she had never been greedy of admiration, and she had loved.

But though this had proved unfortunate, she was of too gentle and loving a nature not to feel keenly slight and unkindness.

She had never, to the best of her knowledge, given cause of offence to Mr. Church, and was, therefore, at a loss to account for con-

duct in him she had not experienced before ; he treated her with incivility, bordering on rudeness.

On all occasions he cut her, and meeting him, as she did, at the houses of her friends, it made it especially unpleasant. On one occasion, on being deputed " to take her in" to dinner, he turned away and gave his arm to Rosalind Smythe.

Sybil fell to the charge of Mr. Bertram ; she had no cause for regret, though she felt the indignity which she veiled under womanly pride.

" The first person," thought she, " to teach me humility, the first sign of the fall. It comes from the church, and must, therefore, be right, though certainly not charitable."

The other drawback to her comfort came nearer home—it was Mrs. Marshall.

This lady had returned to the Rookery.

She might well say that the voluminous epistle she wrote in answer to her daughter's announcement of her intended marriage

would be the last she would receive from her, for where would be the necessity of correspondence if she took up her abode in the same house?

It had not arrived at this yet, though it was next door to it, for she inhabited the same region as of old, from whence she perpetrated sorties on the luckless Sybil, at any and all hours. And had it not been that she stood half in dread of the dragon, who, in the shape of Miss Nugent, kept guard over the golden fleece—that lamb Sybil—Mrs. Marshall would not have waited the return of her “dear child,” but have transported at once, herself and her “comportments,” right into the very heart of the Ringwood fortress.

But Cassie was resolute to hold her own while she was prime minister, and Mrs. Marshall, driven back as an enemy, like Alfred of old, came into camp disguised, if not as a minstrel, at least as a friend, and patiently bided her time, feeling it incumbent on her to forgive her erring child, and bestow on her

the invaluable benefit of her maternal care and counsel, which Adela did not require, and John did not appreciate as a proper son-in-law was bound to do.

Besides, she could not but confess that Robert Blake's was much the most desirable house, every way, while he himself was less flighty, and the best off, and she really was of a sociable disposition, and esteemed quite as much as her daughter the *agrémens* of an easy and luxurious style of living, which was not so attainable with solitude and three or four hundred a-year.

But, like everything else, Mrs. Marshall's term of probation came to an end at last.

The wanderers returned, and found the daughter of the house waiting, with open arms, to receive them; the father folded his daughter to his breast, and silently thanked the Giver of all Good for the inestimable treasure bestowed on him in such a child.

Mabel was touched by the affectionate greeting of herself, but artificial always, she

doubted the genuineness of every one—she was to be pitied.

“She acts well:” was her second thought, but she had not long to criticise, for surprise at the presence of her mother superseded, for the moment, all other sensations. She doubted her eyes, and believed the fact of being clasped within the maternal arms, and the tender expressions accompanying, to be the unsubstantial fabric of a dream.

“Is it indeed you, mamma?”

“Yes, my love,” was the affectionate response. “It is your own dear mamma, who has been longing for the happy moment to tell her sweet Mabel how much she loves her.”

“That’s very sweet and kind of you, mother, love. Robert and I were planning as we came along, a visit to you at Brighton; the first thing, to ask you to return to your old home at the Rookery.”

“I am there now, child, but cannot bear the place now you are gone; if you’ll believe

me, I have not had a night's rest since I returned, for thinking I hear thieves breaking in."

"We must fortify it," says Robert, "and give mother a needle-gun, fit thing for a lady to defend herself with," and he approached and saluted her blooming cheek.

The answer was not the one expected; the "kiss of peace," save for disarranging her *illumination*, might have condoned it, but to be called "mother" by him, whom once she had destined should greet her by a yet dearer title—it was a shock, akin to that of "grand-mother," and she retired with her wounded feeling to repair—the ravages of time.

Miss Nugent on their entrance stood in the background, seemingly the least interested person of the group, but it was only seeming, for her heart beat violently, and she had drawn back into the dusk, lest her emotion should be visible to those from whom she would fain conceal it.

Robert, released from the loving welcome

of his daughter, caught a glimpse of a well-known face looking out of the dim obscure.

Till this hour Robert had never thought Cassandra resembled her sister, his dead wife Nellie.

It came to him now.

He stood for a moment transfixed, as though the dead had risen from her grave to reproach him for his inconstancy.

Shade or substance, the semblance was still dear, and he walked towards it.

"Is it you, my dear Cassie?" said he, and unconsciously his dark eyes searched the lineaments of the sister for the traces of the loved remembrance.

Cassandra crimsoned under the scrutiny; she saw but read not, or rather interpreted it into entreaty for forbearance to the successor in his affections.

Mabel, in the faculty of vision given to her, saw too, though apparently absorbed in the interchange of affection with her mamma: Cassie white, then scarlet, her conscious

timidity, she read perfectly, and guessed instantly the secret the other believed hidden from all the world.

There was something of supercilious triumph in Mabel's reception of Miss Nugent's frank address, but the latter took it in good part, believing it to be Robert's wish, and mentally subscribed to that soundest of all pieces of philosophy—It behoves one to make the best of a bad business, since what is done cannot be undone.

Sybil not only subscribed to this, but acted up to it.

The first meeting over, she found the French proverb correct, "*Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coute.*" Everything else went smoothly on: She had subdued self; Mabel was her father's wife; she could never think of her as "mamma," or call her so, but she should never have reason to complain of any want of consideration and respect on her part—she would try to love her for her father's sake.

She had fancied it would be a painful moment when ceding the place she had so long held as the head of her father's table, and laying down her small sceptre of the carving-knife confess that her small kingdom was indeed taken from her.

But this she discovered to be more in imagination than in reality. All fell so orderly in its place, that she was scarce aware it was to be done till it was past.

Mr. Blake was not by any means insensible to the sacrifices his daughter was called on to make for him, but he did not let it appear, and with her beside him sat conversing with much cheerfulness till dinner, a very late one, was announced : He then rose, and approached his bride, who looked regal in her triumph.

Mrs. Marshall and Miss Nugent followed. Sybil purposely dallied behind a space, to let Mabel go in and take possession : She had neither right nor inclination to dispute it with her.

Mabel, however, with a pretty pretence of humility, sat herself down beside her husband.

But she was the last to have permitted another, much less Sybil, to take precedence of her, in any matter, however small.

She was marvelling whether "she would have the boldness to do so now," when two little hands were laid on her shoulders, and the divinest of countenances bending over her, Sybil smiling said—

"Now, Mabel, dear! You are not going to cut me out of my place next to papa. Rise, fair lady, and let me conduct you to the chair of state."

Mabel looked up into the wondrous eyes shining on her, and then bowed her head involuntarily before the majestic presence of the angel. Tears, those rare visitants to temperaments such as hers, rushed into her eyes; rising, she kissed the semblance of divinity, and walked humbly to her place.

"Nearer to you now, papa dear," says Sybil, taking the vacated seat.

"And dearer," he answered, in a low voice, and then he said grace.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SKELETON IN THE CUPBOARD.

MABEL's first sensation on again entering Ringwood was one of pride. She a second time was installed as its mistress, a second time she filled the position so eagerly coveted. It had been a bitter moment when forced to renounce, but the *fiat* had been so peremptory and decisive that, at the time, a return to it was as improbable as a war between England and France, friends fast and true for ever and aye.

Queen Consorts have on rare occasions,

from motives of policy or affection, been chosen as partners by the successors to their deceased husband's realms—sometimes to their own misery. Ringwood was not a kingdom, nor its chair of state a throne, but its dignity, if we may term it so, was as high under any circumstances as Mabel could aspire to, and the chances of happiness were all in her favour, could she only get out of the scrape she was in respecting Mr. Church, for he was her only bugbear now.

But, like the drop of leaven which seasons the whole lump, like the unsightly object in a landscape which will obtrude itself on the sight and close our eyes to surrounding beauties, so this same bugbear of hers became an ever present evil, thrusting itself between her and her positive possession of every earthly enjoyment.

She had anticipated a second time the girlish delight of her first assumption of a wife's honours, when youthful hopes and exhaustless spirits created a Paradise of their

own, to which indeed worldly success or advantages were mere accessories.

But such was not the case; though all from without combined to produce it, the want was in herself.

In the hurry and bustle of her arrival, her bugbear was for a time forgotten; this over, her skeleton in the cupboard stalked out, armed with new forces now that she was within the enemy's camp.

Her first desire was to obtain some information respecting him, and on retiring for the night, she significantly reproached Sybil, who accompanied her to the door of her room, for the value she placed on her attractions. She was too chary of herself; positively she, Mabel, had not exchanged half-a-dozen words with her since she came in, and really in future her time would be so occupied, she did not know when another opportunity might occur for a little quiet conversation.

Sybil took the hint, and followed her in where fairy fingers had been at work, and

transformed Mabel's apartments into as much of a palace of art as their space would permit.

Loving and energetic in the excess of devotion to her father, Sybil knew she could not better please him than to make the house as attractive as possible to his bride.

"How pretty it all is!" says Mabel, stopping on her way to her dressing-room. "I shall never have finished admiring. It's like the transformation scene in the pantomime, this conversion of my old horrors into beauties. You don't mean to say this antediluvian four-poster is the old original—"

"Catafalque?" suggests Sybil.

"A capital name," returned Mabel, laughing. "A pair of horses attached, it would make a very respectable perambulating hearse, 'but Othello's occupation's o'er.' A catafalque lined with rose-colour satin would indeed be a 'mockery of woe.'"

She paused and held up her light to make a survey of the outside. Nothing escaped her sharp eyes.

"Admirable! The old heir-loom velvet, I declare! 'Air-loom' poor Reginald (her first husband) used to call it, in justice to its porous state. The heir-loom cobwebs have not had the same respect paid to them, I see. Gone to the winds! It's a wonder the cobweb didn't follow in the process of revival. It's verily putting new cloth to an old garment."

"But the velvet *is* an heir-loom as you say, and papa would never have permitted that to be removed, so I made the best of it."

"You, Sybil? You?" exclaimed Mabel with great surprise (?). "Have you been doing all this? I thought it was papa (pouting). I shall scold him, for I was in perfect raptures when I came in, and he took all the credit to himself."

"Papa treasures everything belonging to the old family, and he has a great veneration for this catafalque. I ought not to call it so on his account. Perhaps you do not yet know what an enthusiastic admirer he is of Oliver Cromwell, and there *is* a tradition that he

stopped at this house on his way from Worcester and slept in this very four-poster which we so much despise."

"How very interesting!" says Mabel, smiling.

"Yes," returns Sybil, simply. "Papa often says it is a coincidence that he should live here, for, remotely, he traces his descent from the family of the famous Admiral Blake, who was so distinguished during the Commonwealth."

"Really?" and there was mockery in Mabel's voice and lifted brows.

Sybil's colour deepened, but she kept her ground.

"You think it nonsense, but papa is not the least superstitious."

"Me laugh at my dear Robert, my kind, devoted husband!" cried Mabel, with sudden spirit. "How could you suppose such a thing?"

"Good night, Mabel!" says Sybil.

"Good night?" echoes her step-mother,

astonished. "You do not call this a tête-à-tête I hope. Our conversation has been more instructive than entertaining I fear, and has made you sleepy."

"I am tired," answered Sybil, gently. "Do you know what o'clock it is? 12.30, as we say in these railway days."

"Not possible! How the time slips away. We came back so late!" and she led the way into her dressing-room. "What a pretty place you have made of this, too! A sin to dress here. It's my 'bowdoor,' as cook calls her 'parly;' so my husband tells me. How I have laughed with him at her and her odd ways. What do you think? Shall I get on with her? She did not take kindly to me in days past, and I cannot expect her to do so after having you for her mistress. Grave or sad? I hope, my dear, you did not think I was so rude as to laugh at you about 'Old Noll,' who was the greatest man that ever sat on our throne."

"And if you did I —"

"But I did not, indeed; on the contrary, I was admiring your great erudition. I shall never know half what you do (kissing her). You are a perfect Cabinet Cyclopædia."

"Do not quiz so, Mabel, dear."

"Quiz you? No, indeed! It's true. Sit down a few minutes, my child! How does that sound? You laugh, but you are my daughter now! Papa is not yet up, so we will amuse ourselves till he comes. This is the last of my school days. To-morrow my troubles begin. What an excellent manager mamma is! How cleverly she contrived about staying the night here, and now she is in she will not go out, you'll see! Now that's what I never could do. I could not manoeuvre, if my life depended on it. Yet I have been a fortunate woman to have won two such men as Reginald and your papa. I cannot tell you how kind he has been to me. I do not believe there is another like him; and it is so good of you to do this for me, and not hate me for taking your papa from you."

"Papa's happiness is all I desire," answered Sybil.

"A daughter worthy of him," was Mabel's smiling rejoinder. "And now we must set about doing something for you. I must look out for some one for my Sybil."

Sybil made a sign of dissent.

"We must, indeed! My husband is so anxious that you should be settled, and means to do, I don't know what. Have you seen the Bertrams since? He was so pleased to hear of their visit."

"They have only been once."

"The beginning of things. Mr. Bertram is an eligible party, the best match in the place, and pretty well the only one worthy of you, for Mr. Church would never do."

Sybil gave a slight start, which did not escape the notice of her companion. Suspicious always, she attributed it to a feeling of another kind.

There never was yet the woman, however faithless herself, who could bear that her power over her lover should have been so

slight that he could turn to another for consolation, and that other a rival, perhaps a superior to herself in that most precious of all gifts in her eyes, beauty.

"Has he returned from abroad, do you know?" she asked, Sybil not having made any reply to her last remark.

She was answered in the affirmative.

"Has he been here much?"

"Not at all," was the answer. "We met him several times, when dining out."

"He took you in, of course?"

"Not once."

"That was a mistake."

"An intentional mistake, perhaps." And Sybil smiled.

"You speak in riddles. Something behind the curtain, not to be revealed just yet?"

"If there is, I do not know what it is."

She spoke reservedly, not desiring to tell of his want of politeness towards herself, which, causeless as it appeared, she could scarce believe to be without a cause.

Mabel Blake flashed up at the answer.

"I suppose he has been speaking against me."

"To me? And you my father's wife!"

"True! I forgot! He would scarce do that, and you would not listen to him if he did?"

"Certainly not."

"What a noble girl you are, Sybil! Indeed I admire you beyond everybody. How was he looking?"

"I cannot speak from my own observation, but I heard someone remark he was looking dreadfully ill."

"Or ill-tempered? Which was it?" And Mabel laughed a short laugh. "The two always go together with him. Believe me, he is not an amiable man. I know him, and warn you."

"It is not necessary, I assure you. Mr. Church has no intentions towards me."

Mabel was forced to be content with this answer, though not by any means content. But there was nothing more to be learned from

Sybil; so she all at once remembered how late it had become, and how fatigued she felt after so much travelling; and "my husband is coming up, and he will scold me for the first time, for injuring my health with these late hours. Beware of the first quarrel, they say. I shall. Ah, Sybil! There never was a man so devoted as your papa"

She saluted Sybil very tenderly, but as papa had entered to reproach, and was thereby witness to this *entente cordiale*, it may have been intended for his especial edification. If so, it was successful, for he admired it extremely, and the trio, "Good night," was most harmonious.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HUGGING THE SHORE.

Mrs. MARSHALL did take up her abode at Ringwood—once in, “not all the king’s horses, nor all the king’s men,” could have turned her out again, did she find it to her comfort and convenience to remain! Her daughter admired her ingenuity excessively, the more as it was executed so neatly.

It was perfectly right and proper that she should wish to be in waiting to receive her darling child, after so long a separation, and on her entrance into the house she was henceforth, to occupy as its mistress.

This part she performed with her accustomed grace, as she did every other of her performances during the evening, including the piano, at which she sang songs, no longer of playful and girlish coquetry, but tender and sentimental—"Be mine, dear Maid," "By the sad sea waves," "Love not!" and others, bespeaking melancholy and abandonment.

Her new son-in-law stood by, and much admired the expressive style which marked hers as peculiar; when she finished he led her to her seat, and she beguiled her time with tatting and tattling.

Miss Nugent was not in spirits, and had before declined exhibiting, but, at the request of Robert, she yielded, and sang "Lo perfide," with wonderful spirit and brilliancy. It moved one of her listeners to the very centre of his being, and Mabel thought, "she shall not stay here long!"

Time moved relentlessly on, and the clock struck the hour of eleven.

"Is this clock right!" exclaims Mrs. Marshall, in seeming surprise.

"I believe so, it was set only this morning," was Sybil's answer.

"Dear! I had no idea!" returns Mrs. Marshall, "and I have that long dreary walk through the park before me."

She looked towards the master of the house, but he did not hear; he was in conversation with Cassie, and inwardly marvelling that the resemblance of Cassie's voice to her sister's, as well as the likeness in countenance, should never have been remarked by him till now. In both, however, the similarity was general, rather than distinctive; his wife's voice had been soft and sweet, while Cassie's, more fully developed, was a gift of surpassing excellence.

As he did not appear to have heard Mrs. Marshall's sidelong appeal, she rose and approached him.

"Do you mind?" said she, persuasively, "letting your man drive me in the chaise to the Rookery? Those silly girls have neglected

to send Errington (her *factotum*) for me, and I really have not courage to walk there alone this time of night."

Robert was in a fix, he thought of Sybil, and suspected this to be a ruse.

"Is it imperative on you to go to-night?"

"I think I really ought," she answered, "if only to look after those idle creatures. I never knew anything like servants, they never do a single thing but what you tell them. They know how to take care of themselves though; they will have given me up by this time I'll be bound, and are both fast asleep; servants are horridly selfish!"

"It would be a pity to disturb them," says Miss Nugent, silyly. "They are trying the beauty-sleep, no doubt; one hour before midnight is worth all the hours after it."

"You have tried it?" asked Mabel.

"Often," returns Cassie, laughing. "That is why I wear so well."

"Many a true word spoken in jest, Cassandra," said Robert.

A vivid glow suffused Cassie's face, such as was rarely seen on hers.

Mable eyed her satirically, but the other was not easily cowed.

"I shall grow vain," said she.

"Of your beautiful voice," says Sybil, "as well you may be. I never heard you sing so splendidly."

"She sang feelingly," was Mabel's rejoinder.

"*Le sage entend à demi-mot.*"

Cassandra understood, and her rose-tints deepened to scarlet; she glanced uneasily at Robert, but he turned to Mrs. Marshall.

"You must not think of going to-night," turning to his bride, "must she, my dear?"

"We must refer to Sybil," she answered, giving him a bewitching smile, "she holds the keys to-day, I am but her guest. It is not yet midnight."

Sybil made no reply. She knew she was in for it, now and for ever. She rung the bell and sent for the maid.


"You must prepare a room for Mrs. Marshall," said she; "she will sleep here to-night."

"I have got the chintz room ready for her," said the girl, "as she told me she was going to stay, and I couldn't speak to ask you, miss."

"To think of my forgetting that!" exclaims Mrs. Marshall, not in the least disconcerted. "But really to see my Mabel looking so charming and happy is enough to make one forget anything."

"Even to forgetting that they brought their dressing-bag preparatory," says Cassie, archly, who had heard Mrs. Marshall give the maid directions as to its disposal, and, anticipating events, found an opportunity to warn Sybil, advising her to be firm on this point, and steady in her refusal.

"But I have no power to refuse, and opposition would only provoke useless animosity; one thing I promise, I will not ask her to stay; if she does, it will be contrary to my wish. I shall be the sufferer."



And Mrs. Marshall proved the axiom, "In for a penny, in for a pound," for she did not go away, and heaped on the devoted head of her son-in-law such a catalogue *raisonnée* of grievances by way of excuse that he deemed it necessary to lay an embargo on the pretty Rookery, a favourite spot of his, and test the truth of Mrs. Marshall's allegations as to its insecurity against thieves, its dampness, leaky roof, and dilapidated state generally, the rats, the mice, the weevils; the windows were old fashioned, and so were the grates; the rooms wanted painting and papering, the ceilings were low, all but the drawing-room built out, over which, if two or three rooms could be placed, it would cost but a trifle, and turn a cottage into a reasonable sized dwelling-house. Then the kitchen swarmed with black beetles, and the boiler had a hole in it, and the oven you could see through, and it wanted an entire new range.

Mr. Blake put a veto on any more wants, the range was so very extensive. A sur-

vey was made, and found reports, according to custom, in excess of the truth. It was not so bad as to be uninhabitable for a lady of small independence, and living rent free.

His mamma-in-law differed from him, because she did not wish to live there. By residing with her daughter she would live free every way, and be one of the stylish people, as the Ringwood family were styled by their humbler neighbours. Besides this was the only compensation he could make for the "breach of promise," damages ten thousand pounds. Not that she hinted a word of this. No, no, it would have been cutting the ground from under her.

He regretted the arrangement on Sybil's account. For himself, his house was large, his heart larger, and would have accommodated fifty other people, fifty times more disagreeable than Mrs. Marshall, had it been required; but the lady was disagreeable to his daughter, and this close proximity would be an additional annoyance.

He expressed concern on the occasion. This was sufficient for everything in the eyes of his daughter; she immediately discovered it would be less a tax for her to reside with them than as it now stood, when politeness exacted the entire sacrifice of her time to her as a temporary, though constant and most obtrusive visitor.

Finding the Rookery returned upon his hands, he made an examination of it for the purpose of letting, and here he in his turn was destined to feel the full force of "In for a penny, in for a pound."

Mrs. Marshall took the lead in the direction of this affair: Active and energetic, she was competent to the task, and so long as it was not out of her own pocket, she could be right royally liberal and expensive.

The world is made up of differences of opinion, and in no respect is this more apparent than in the estimation formed between those who pay and are paid. They cannot agree on the point, they view it with interested or selfish eyes.

Mr. Blake opened his eyes at the weight of the trifle it would cost to put the Rookery in order, a mere syllabub in Mrs. Marshall's opinion, but one of great gravity in her son-in-law's. The kitchen range was a drop in the ocean in the extensive range of alterations and repairs, but when it was done it could not be denied that the Rookery had quadrupled its consequence, and he consoled himself with the fact that it was benefiting the property, and certainly in the blindness to the future, as in accordance with our condition, he dreamed not of the tenant for whom it was destined.

But to return.

Miss Nugent performed what she considered an heroic act in yielding to the solicitations of her niece to stay to receive the bride. This done, the force of heroism would no further go.

"I could not, indeed, my dear!" in answer to Sybil's appeal; "I could not stay in a house she is mistress of. Never! Easier to part while there is still some show of civility

between us. A look of hers has produced more ill-feeling than a thousand words would have done. We must bridle our tongues; but in hate as in love, the eyes speak a language, the tongue may not."

"I stand alone," said Sybil, "there is no resisting fate."

"It is that which influences me more than anything. Do you think I could stand quietly by and see you trampled upon, made a mere nonentity of? You are too submissive, Sybil. A little more spirit, and you would be better off, and I should love you more."

"Would you counsel me to rebel against my father?"

"Heaven forbid! I did not mean that; but you should show your independance a little more with these women. Here's the Marshall, we let her put her foot in, and now she has wriggled her whole body after it. I pity you!"

"Why did you, so strong-minded an aide-de-camp, let her?"

"Wage war with her ; make the place too hot for her."

"Be an Ishmaelite, like dear auntie. Make papa miserable?"

Tears came into Cassie's eyes.

"I am sorry to leave you, my dear, but I cannot stay. She will not ask me, for there is a nameless antipathy between us, and I do not intend her to signify to me that my absence is more desired than my company. So I hold to my purpose of not sleeping a night in *her* house as she considers this, and go this afternoon."

Mrs. Blake expressed much regret that Miss Nugent's invaluable counsel and assistance should be in such urgent request that she could only give her (Mabel) so very small a portion of them ; but she could not think of trespassing further after her generosity to Sybil, who was now her step-daughter, and, as dear Robert's child, an object of the tenderest solicitude.

"It could not be otherwise with a girl like

Sybil," was Miss Nugent's reply; "and I can perfectly believe a step-mother being as conscientious in the discharge of this duty as in her others. With mothers and step-mothers it depends on their principles."

Mabel was pleased with this little speech, and expressed a wish that if she really must go now she would visit them again shortly, and they parted better friends than could have been expected.

With her Sybil felt the last link of her old life broken: she grew all at once wonderfully old; the instability of all human affairs had been so profound during these last few months, that she somehow fancied that Time must have slipped his finger across her dial, and launched her without warning into a green old age.

CHAPTER XXX.

A BOA-CONSTRUCTOR.

It was not without cause that Mabel was curious as to her next meeting with Mr. Church, which, situated as they were, it was impossible could be for ever avoided.

She had behaved wickedly to him, for as her mother said, she was engaged to him.

He had proposed to her on the very first symptom of vacillation on her part. Not yet certain of her ground with Mr. Blake, and doubtful whether he really would marry again, pleased, too, with having brought the difficult

Mr. Church up to the mark, she was in the situation of the animal between the two bundles of hay, and was dubious how to decide.

She pleaded for time, which was granted, when, varying as her prospects with the other went up or down, she played fast and loose with the proposal of an honest man throughout the winter.

The withdrawal of Mr. Blake from the field made the course clear, and her decision seemed easy; but she took umbrage with Mr. Church as the cause, and refused him.

He knew her, at least he believed he did, and would not permit her to make a windlass of him, for the furtherance of her machinations, and resolute of will, bound her to her good faith.

Unstable as water was she, vexed with Mr. Blake's resolute determination to cede her to his rival, she found it easy to make her peace with Mr. Church, or seemed to make it, for

it is doubtful if she really ever did intend to marry him after this.

In the belief it might be productive of advancement, and urged by her, he unwittingly accepted the post of travelling companion to a young nobleman during "the Longs." She kept up a constant correspondence with him to the last, and her marriage with another was so incredible, that till verified beyond a doubt, he could not, and would not believe it.

He was not a man likely to sit down quietly under so great an affront, carried out deliberately, and with consummate falsehood.

Guilt is a coward, and she knew she had committed a crime, greater in the abstract, because it could be done with impunity, the usual modes of redress he was shut out from, and she escaped punishment. Censure or reprobation of her conduct she would not hear, no one would dare to repeat it to her.

What she anticipated would come from the

hands of the man she had wronged, though she knew herself safer with him than perhaps any other; but still something he would do for certain, perhaps send her letters to her husband, and she kept a constant look out, to intercept, if possible, their destination.

But they did not appear, and she could think of no other mode of retaliation, she a woman, he a gentleman and a clergyman, prohibited seeking compensation, either by the law of equity or honour.

Time went on, and she trusted that after all, her letters might not have been of sufficient value and interest to preserve, and like those of their recipients had been committed to flames more ardent than the ephemeral ones of earthly loves.

Events arrange themselves after their own fashion, and take a marvellous pleasure in foiling human schemes and expectations.

Mabel's present care was to avoid by every means a *rencontre* with Mr. Church, and she had been singularly fortunate, for at the

dinner parties given in honour of their return, they had not once met.

Ringwood had not kept pace with the march of outdoing, the distinctive type of the nineteenth century, and till the invasion of the railway, its shops, its luxuries were of the simplest forms. Anything out of the common was not to be had for love or money, and the natives were happy, for they liked what they got, and knew nothing of other. Those less wise cost both trouble and money, ere they could gratify their more fastidious tastes.

Gloucester, the nearest town, had been a journey of some length, but with the railway it now was within hail.

On a certain day Mrs. Blake and Sybil took train for Gloucester, or rather, not to be premature, they intended so doing.

Women-like they were not too early, and Mr. Blake, who was to drive them to the station, played patience on a monument to admiration.

Arriving at the station, the ladies hurried

to find places, while the major domo went to procure their tickets. The porter made a survey of the carriages, "Room for two. First class!" He opened a door; in went the ladies, they look out eagerly for their gentleman, he rushes on to the platform, espies their extended hands, puts the tickets within them, smiles, and with tender pressure of the fair digits—a bang, a shriek, and "Perseus" with the winged feet moves on, sublime and irresistible, a conqueror and a god.

Two heads very dear to Robert look eagerly out to catch a last glimpse of him, as he watched the train bear away; the last they see of him is a wave of the hand, a speck, and now, Robert, the clang and bustle, the station itself, is miles behind.

Tears are in the eyes of Sybil, smiles on the lips of Mabel, as they draw in, and settle down in their places. The one took her seat in the centre compartment, and looked thoughtfully out on the landscape, the other—Mabel—from her place next the door, glanced

carelessly round, to see who were their fellow travellers.

There are moments when even the most self-possessed and case-hardened will yield to the force of circumstances, and lose themselves and their very attributes in the extremity of their surprise.

Mabel doubted her being ; she stared as if fascinated, her eyes opening wider and wider, and then made a movement as if to spring out of the carriage, for in the cross corner of the opposite side sat Mr. Church—he and no other, and the expression of his face was not that of despair, but of rage and defiance.

Sybil saw him not, she was beside him, but she saw her step-mother's discomposure with surprise and concern.

“ Do you feel ill ? ” said she gently.

“ It's nothing,” answered Mabel quickly, and turning away her head looked fixedly out of window.

Our good girl took no further notice, but sat “ in maiden meditation, fancy free,” her

lovely eyes wandering, as her thoughts, on the world beyond her. The first, bounded by the square of glass through which she looked; the last, her thoughts, owning no bounds, cleaved the distance, and were lost in memories of the past.

The other occupants of the carriage were all gentlemen, and the silence characteristic of Englishmen had been maintained fully half their route, when the ice was broken by the offer of his paper, by one of the corners, to his opposite neighbour.

"Thanks," was the answer, "I have already seen it."

Sybil started in good earnest, for it was the voice of Mr. Church beside her; as if to confirm it, he bent forward to make a remark *en passant* to his fellow traveller, and the hasty glance she took placed the matter beyond doubt.

But what had she done? Why should she fear Mr. Church?

She soon regained her composure, and dis-

missed him and his unpoliteness to her from her thoughts.

Not so Mrs. Blake. The longer she remained in his company the more nervous she became; the silence affected her more than a thousand reproaches would have done. She felt the cold glitter of his eye upon her, though she never looked at him, and would feel a chill, as a passing shadow on the window through which she looked mirrored the interior of the carriage, and his dark face turned towards her.

On arriving at Gloucester she made all haste to quit the train; Sybil would follow, but is perforced to wait in her inner place for some others to pass out, among them Mr. Church, who made a plunge to precede her.

"Again!" thinks she; but soon repents her uncharitable surmise, for in the momentary pause preceding his exit he addressed her with a suavity rare with him. She looked up in surprise, and blushed deeply as she replied to him.

As soon as he got out, he turned, held out his hand to assist her to alight, then lifted his hat and bade her "good day," nor looked as if he knew that Mabel stood by, insanely hoping he might hold out the hand of peace to her also.

She was more humiliated and nettled by the attention shown to Sybil at her expense, than at the hostility his rudeness and neglect portended.

It roused jealousy, secret and bitter. Sybil's reserve in speaking of him, which arose from the desire of not retailing his mortifying treatment, she set down to conscious preference, and she resolved to circumvent both, and promised herself no small *delassement* thereon in the long hours of Ringwood.

On their return they found Mr. Blake in waiting. Mabel rejoiced that they had escaped a second *rencontre* with her skeleton ; she had looked covertly round on entering the station at Gloucester, and into the carriage before she got in, but he was nowhere to be seen, and

she thought "if he does return to-day, it will be by a later train; he will look in at the Cathedral, no doubt. If I only had not chosen this, of all days in the year."

Such was the tenour of her thoughts the whole way back; she, however, rejoiced too soon, for on stepping on to the platform—surprise upon surprise!—there stood her veritable Nemesis conversing most amicably with his former and successful rival, her husband.

Both were on the look out, but the latter saw them first. Mabel hung her head; she feared a repetition of the morning, and in her lord and master's presence, for she saw a flash in the eyes of her enemy on beholding her.

But both approached.

Robert saw dissent legibly written in his wife's face, as he presented his belongings to his new friend.


"I had the pleasure of travelling to Gloucester in the same carriage this morning,"

said Mr. Church, "as well as returning by the same train, so we must not be considered strangers."

This was addressed to Sybil, though he bowed to Mabel also. Robert saw no reason to be unfriendly, and suffered him to escort his daughter out of the station and to hand her into the waggonette he had brought for them and their parcels. He offered him, likewise, a seat therein, as far as their roads lay, which was declined with regret that he must take a different direction, and they parted on good terms.

Mr. Blake received his first curtain lecture, for being more friendly than his lady approved.

She told him Mr. Church was a strange man, his behaviour was unaccountable, so affronting in the train to her, that she made up her mind to ask him (Robert) to seek for an explanation from him. It was perfectly absurd to veer about like a weathercock, as he had been doing to-day.



Mr. Blake promised, as required, not to be too friendly with the gentleman who performed the part of a weather vane, and should he repeat the vagaries of the compass, to enquire the cause of his so doing.

He was especially enjoined not to invite this objectionable party to the house.

Our inestimable friend Robert was not quite such a novice as not to have the smallest of suspicions that his dear Mabel was mortal, and did not altogether approve that her late admirer should be so soon consoled, and rightly judged that if Sybil was his object, the young man would find his way to the house, on some pretext or another, without his breaking his parole.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ARACHNE.

HAD Mabel rested here, the victor she was, it is probable that Mr. Church, who though he despised her for the falsehood and treachery she had practised towards him, and would certainly never forgive her, might yet have remained passive in his enmity.

It may not be a very original remark, but it is nevertheless a true one, that no woman can endure the transfer of the heart that once was hers into the keeping of another, though it may be her own work which brought it to pass.

She may have jilted her lover, treated him unworthily, shewn herself as unprincipled as the "fascinating Mrs. Forster," yet she still desires to be remembered with regret, he must still feel that interest in her and her actions which she still maintains in him and his, the stronger on her part, as greater the wrong she has committed. He may hate her, burn with revenge, feel anything, everything but indifference, the cruellest wound of all to a woman's vanity.

"He did not care much for her!" is a stigma she will never get the better of.

Mabel knew Mr. Church far too well to suppose he would ever enact the despairing lover, become "a changed being," pine, droop, fall away, turn lunatic, and all for the love of cruel Barbara Allen: Perhaps die like the ill-used hero of that doleful ditty—sweet delightful episodes of the passion, in the minds of sentimental misses, but which with pain we confess are cases not to be found in this too realistic age.

She also knew that he was one that could not forgive, much less forget; she knew him to be revengeful, and expected him to do much more than to treat her to the cold shoulder, glare at her, be rude, or worse, rudely civil as it suited his purpose.

This would have been sufficiently galling to a woman of her disposition. She would have preferred to see him wrathful and furious; but that her power over him should have been so weak, that he could immediately turn to another, and that other Sybil, younger, and surpassing herself in captivity; to be second, where she had always been first; be made a convenience for the furtherance of his new suit, was what she could not and would not brook.

Mabel "laid the flattering unction to her soul" that it would be easy to foil him, he not residing in the immediate neighbourhood, and his duties confining him exclusively to the district he presided over.

They had fortunately finished with the

dinners given to them on their return from the hymeneal tour, and with the rare success of never once meeting with the objectionable party. She would for the future decline invitations where there was a chance of so doing, and trusted to fortune, who had proved so incomparable a friend, to remove this skeleton of hers from the circle in which he now moved.

Such was the substance of Mabel's intentions, but Fortune, shy when sought, appeared to consider that she had done enough for her votary, and Mr. Church was no business of hers, he was of the masculine gender, a lord of creation, able to take care of himself, while she being a lady, was timid of him, and declined to interfere with his arrangements.

He was wide awake to every motive or movement of the woman who had acted the traitor's part towards him, for whose eyes once opened to hypocrisy and treachery will ever close them again?

He knew well that his presence must be anything but agreeable to her, that she avoided him, and Sybil his weapon, also withdrawn, he resolved to circumvent her.

Fortune did so far move in his behalf that she granted him a meeting with Mr. Blake on some parish matters; the same interchange of friendly relations were then renewed.

Mr. Church seemed entirely to forget that Mr. Blake had superseded him in the affections of his mistress, a mortification the pride of men feel keenly. He laid himself out to be agreeable, a flattering proof of good will and esteem in the haughty Mr. Church.

Mr. Blake could attribute but one cause for this manifestation, he did not refuse the olive-branch, nor did he break his promise to his wife by inviting her skeleton to his house. But on quitting the "Board-room" where the local business of the parish was carried on, the worthy vicar who accompanied Robert out, proposed a walk; Mr. Church had followed them, but he excused himself on the

ground that he must go home and write his sermon for the ensuing Sunday.

"Then," said Mr. Smythe, pleased to see his friends' friends, and amiably desirous of assisting to promote peace and concord, "we will take your road, Church; it is the straight one, though not so attractive, and I will ask you for a glass of water, for my throat is dry with the hard speaking these stormy meetings involve. It is hard," he continued, "to fight against so many contending interests; the 'battles of life,' as the great novelist called them, are no mean struggles."

On arriving at the Parsonage, Mr. Church invited them in, tempting, serpent-wise, the man of letters (Mr. Blake), with the offer of a sight of a rare old Armenian manuscript he had been so fortunate as to meet with at Vienna.

The Bookworm was not proof against temptation, a veritable Armenian was a temptation he could not resist. Mr. Smythe had entered for his glass of water, and he

saw no reason for remaining outside, though, henpecked, he knew a second curtain lecture to be in store for him, when his outraged wife should learn of his dereliction from duty.

He entered and saw, and was much interested in the venerable relic, which he an authority pronounced genuine.

Mr. Church produced the glass of water, which must have been turned into wine, for it had the taste thereof, and was as refreshing and as exhilarating as such; with a wave of his hand there also appeared a collation which from the time of day must be pronounced a luxurious *dejeuner à la fourchette*, so Mabel's assertion that he was as poor as a church mouse was a libel.

Robert respected his word, and did not invite him in return, for which his conscience smote him, if as he believed the young man had aspirations connected with himself, but as he anticipated, Mr. Church soon returned the visit, and on one pretence or another, came so very often, that the only pretence he

did not make was set down as the real cause of his visits, and Sybil had to answer for it.

She on her part did not believe this. She could not account for the change in his bearing towards herself, but not being as yet blinded by partiality, she could not but own that his manner was deficient in the tenderness and hesitation which marks the passion of love in its early stages.

Mabel too suspected him.

"He does not love her!" was her inward assertion. "A man like him loves but once. That he has done, and no other woman will succeed me in his affections. It is revenge now."

This was her comment every time he came; she flattered herself that love, disappointed it is true, might still be working at the root.

But revenge is not a proof that love exists. On the contrary love has died out, never to be rekindled; hate has taken its place, and being an active agent, meditates revenge.

Mrs. Blake, like the affectionate step-mother

she was, became especially solicitous that no danger should accrue to her dear daughter's peace of mind, on account of his visits.

To her she spoke lightly of him, ridiculed him, jested of his poverty, and told Sybil in genuine charity, that though she herself might have been good enough for Mr. Church, could she have brought herself to share his poverty, yet it would be presumption in him to aspire to the rich heiress of Ringwood.

Sybil would smile at the covert satire of this little platitude.

"Mr. Church ! He here again !" exclaims Mabel, on the servant announcing his presence below.

They were in the pretty sitting-room upstairs, devoted to work and feminine employment.

"Why, he was here a day or two ago. What does he want?"

"He did not say ; he walked in without the sayin' of anythink to me, mum."

This was the answer of her factotum in

the shape of cook's aversion, the page-boy as she scornfully called him "cow-boy," when he failed in respect, which he was careful to avoid, the punishment was too severe.

"Like him, to be sure," she said, in half-tones; "some begging petition, clergymen are dreadful beggars, you never see one without having to put your hand in your pocket. My dear!" addressing Sybil, engaged at work; "never marry one, they are all poor, and though their favourite discourse is the blessings of poverty, yet it is a blessing they so little appreciate, that they marry the richest girls they can find."

Sybil answered not, she thought this gratuitous, and in bad taste in the presence of the servant.

Mabel saw she looked grave.

"Angry," thought she, "the little fool thinks he comes after her!"

"Do you wish to see him, my love?" she asks, with great sweetness.

The girl flushed up.

"Are you not going down?" was the answer, turning her grand eyes full on her.

"Me? Certainly not! He does not come here to see *me*?"

"He asked for you, mum," says my lady's page, with an innocent look.

"Did he? Then I shall not go down, for it was only a subterfuge."

"We had better let him know then," said Sybil, quietly; "he has been waiting some time."

"True," answered Mrs. Blake. "I forgot. You must not be angry with me, Sybil darling!" (To the servant)—"Where is your master?"

"Somewhere in the grounds, mum."

"Then go and look for him, and if you cannot find him, tell Mr. Church so."

[*Exit page.*]

"Mabel!" said her mother, who had been quietly ensconced in a corner with a book, over which she had been indulging in many

forty winks; "I think it would be more becoming for someone to go down to Mr. Church, since he has been admitted, and must know we are within. You must not serve people so, least of all a clergyman."


"Then you go, mamma, since you feel so tenderly disposed towards him! Perhaps you are the object of his visits, Sybil abjuring them: Refused by the daughter, perhaps he seeks consolation in the mamma. You know you do not look thirty, and are at this moment perfectly bewitching in your silver moiré, a bride that ought to be."

"Naughty child to quiz so!"

"It's quite true. Is it not, Sybil?"

"Mrs. Marshall always looks nice, ready for her portrait," answers Sybil, with sincerity.

"Do I, my dear?" returns the lady, pleased. "Then if you say so, it is true. Don't be jealous, Mabel, if I make a conquest of your old flame; nor you, pretty Sybil, if I cut you out."



Mabel glanced slily at her step-daughter, as her mamma sailed gracefully out of the room, her rich silver moiré, had in honour of her dear child's wedding, which she did not attend, making a prodigious rustling and display.

"I should dearly like to get up a match between those two," said Mabel, laughing. "It would not be so bad really, when you come to think of it; mamma certainly does look surprisingly young, and such an active disposition as hers is just suited to a clergyman. He so lofty and solemn, the great stalking-horse! she so grand and gracious, and twenty-five years is not so very great a disparity in age, though it is the lady that has the advantage."

Sybil did not appear to be attending, and put up her work preparatory to leaving the room.

However foolish Mrs. Marshall might be, she was still Mabel's mother, and jokes at her expense, on the part of her daughter, was a sin against nature.

So thought Sybil.

"Jealous!" thinks the affectionate Mabel, eyeing the girl askance, "the little fool is in love with him."

"How very wrong of me," said she caressingly. "Perhaps you wished to go down with mamma, and I have disappointed you. Do forgive me! I did not know it, I sinned in ignorance. If you would only have said so."

"Perhaps I would if I had wished it."

"You do not like him, then?"

Sybil laughed.

"In the way you mean, I fancy, it really has never occurred to me to raise the question, and we girls must never know our own minds till the right person asks it—by that time we generally know what answer to give."

"How sly she is!" thinks Mabel. "But I see through her artifice, and will spoil her plot. Mr. Church she shall never have."

"I see something has vexed you, my dear," said she, "very likely you thought what I

said about clergyman being fortune hunters was intended for you, but indeed it was not, for if Mr. Church likes you it is for your own sweet self, for there is Miss Bertram, young, rich and pretty, and her brother's heiress till he marries, and the Goodbye is no mean match, but she is reserving herself for your papa; she has set her heart upon being his third, that is, if I will let her (laughing)—she hates me for cutting her out, and will not come near here. How would you like her for a step-mother?"

"I should accept her, no doubt," returned Sybil wickedly, "anything for papa's happiness," and she left the room.

She went for her hat, meaning to freshen her mind with a ramble, anywhere, the fresh air, the glad sunshine, the mystical voices of beauteous nature, never failing to invigorate, and dispel the irritation so often, and so causelessly evoked, by the refined and fascinating Mabel Blake—erst Forster.

CHAPTER XXXII.

JOB'S COMFORTER.

ON the steps Sybil met her father about to enter.

"Here is Mr. Church!" said he, "I hope he has not been alone all this time. Have you seen him?"

She answered in the negative.

"Then you had better come in with me."

He was glad to find that his visitor was not solus. Mrs. Marshall was doing the agreeable with all her might, and in her own opinion succeeding to admiration.

We cannot say that Mr. Church was exactly in raptures, when the door opened and closed on this lady, to find that she was to be his charmer for the time being.

"Mr. Blake is out," she began, with timid bashfulness, so becoming to young ladies; "I was afraid you might find it wearisome waiting for his return."

Mr. Church bowed in acknowledgment of the tender consideration shewn to his feeling,

"Mrs. and Miss Blake are well I hope?" he asked.

Mrs. Marshall winced. It might be at having no suitable excuse to make for their non-appearance.

"Yes, very well I thank you," and she took her seat in an elegant fauteuil, and became embedded in the massy folds of her rich silk, which her vast hoop puffed up all round her.

He was not one given to laugh, or make personal remarks, but he could not forbear

smiling, as he thought—"Does she call that grace?"

"Yes," she repeated in soft tones, "I am glad to say Mabel is very well, and very happy too,—the happiest woman far or near."

Mr. Church winced in his turn, but made no reply.

"I cannot say," went on his fair entertainer, "that I approved of her marrying as she did. I was very angry at the time, for I had other views for her. But it seems she knew what was best for herself, for it has turned out all that could be wished."

"Is this the question you have come to discuss with me?" he enquired.

"Not exactly, but the time is suitable, and I wish to remind you, dear Mr. Church, that there is a ruling providence over all things. It is not our own doing, we cannot do anything of ourselves, we are weak and erring, and don't know what is good for us: We don't even marry ourselves, someone else

does it for us, and we *must* submit! I always find that is the best way of taking disagreeable things."

"Philosophy none can dispute," said he, with a sardonic smile; "I shall have to cede my place in the pulpit to you."

The lady was much flattered at the compliment; she had been afraid he would have been angry with her for presuming to give him a lecture; he, the high Mr. Church, who looked down on everyone, as he truly did, in mind as in stature.

"Just so!" says the lady, sweetly. "It is as you say. I have always been remarked for my great good sense; people used to take notice of it—even when I was a child I used to say such clever things."

"Precocious, no doubt," says Mr. Church.

"Yes, I was very precocious, and it was the more extraordinary as it was rare to find sense and—and beauty combined."

"Not desirable qualities in children—they rarely fulfil the promise of their childhood."

This was not flattering to a fully developed infant prodigy.

"But they do sometimes, Mr. Church," said she, aggrieved; "and from all accounts I must have been a most beautiful child. That pretty portrait beside the fire-place was mine—would you like to see it?"

Mr. Church rose, anything to break the hum-drum of Mrs. Marshall's silly tongue.

It was a pretty child that, and marvellously like Greuze's exquisite "Innocence with a Lamb," Mr. Church thought. Indeed, he had one like it in his own possession, but this was coloured and framed, and that made all the difference.

He smiled and turned to its companion on the other side. It was not a Greuze, though one the great French artist would not have disdained as a fitting companion: a young girl of rare beauty, with rapt and thoughtful expression, and eyes looking out of their depths with strange power.

Mr. Church gazed at it attentively; he



knew whose it was instantly, and yet he asked.

“And this?”

“Oh, Miss Blake’s. Done abroad ;—an ugly thing, not at all like her.”

He smiled, looked at it again, and then resumed his seat.

“Yes, dear Mr. Church, I was early called on to use the good sense I was so remarkable for : it was a trying thing for a young creature scarce sixteen to have the temper to deal with I had in poor dear Marshall, and he was a great deal older than me, not far off thirty—double my age, quite an old man.”

Mr. Church again laughed.

“If thirty is old I plead guilty to the charge.”

“Oh, dear no ! You are not old, indeed, Mr. Church ; I did not mean that, I mean in comparison to myself, a mere child ; but it pleased the Almighty to take my poor husband, and, I say it piously, it was a mercy to both of us, and I am sure he is happier where

he is, I trust in Heaven, but he certainly had a strange temper : yet so blind was he to his defects, that he used to declare it was my temper that was in fault, and I worried him to death. Would you believe such a thing ? I always think it was a special Providence shown to me."

"That he died?"

"Well! That I was blessed with such a forgiving disposition—but to go on with what I was saying about Mabel : I hope you will forget what is past,—you cannot undo what has been done. My daughter is truly blessed —Mr. Blake adores her, and if she could eat gold, I am certain he would get it for her."

Mrs. Marshall considered it to be her duty to try and console him, but he was perverse; he sat looking out on the landscape beyond, his face working—one would have believed he was eating something much harder than gold, which must be pleasant to eat of,—perhaps he was "chewing the cud of bitter fancy," which no one relishes.

However, he answered quietly enough—

“Mrs. Blake has proved fortunate. It is not always good comes out of evil : Mr. Blake appears an estimable man, and his daughter has few equals.”

“I hope so !” exclaimed Mrs. Marshall, with sudden asperity.

“You hope so ?” he asked, in surprise.

“Yes. I hope so ! Miss Sybil is thoroughly spoiled by her foreign life; they do not understand the education of young people abroad.”

“Indeed ! Yet numbers of both sexes are sent abroad to be perfected in their education.”

“Perfected in their education ?” repeats Mrs. Marshall, with horror ; “coming back all smatter patter, and heathens that believe in just nothing at all.”

“A new system,” remarks her auditor, amused.

“Give me our sweet English girls, who, if they are stupid, will yet believe everything you tell them. No more of Miss Blake’s foreign invasions for me !”

"Lovely in person, graceful in manner, womanly in person, and gifted beyond her sex,—such is the character reported of Miss Blake on all sides, and the true one, I believe."

"You must not, indeed, Mr. Church," says the lady, playfully, "believe all you hear. Miss Sybil is very different to that, I assure you, and will never suit you."

"You are premature, Mrs. Marshall, and trespassing on the privilege of an old friend."

She was horror struck. "Old friend!" and she did not look thirty, and might pass for her daughter's sister.

"I do not know about being *old*, Mr. Church, but I certainly was your friend, and that you may remember, and it was no fault of mine that my daughter acted as she did."

"Who accuses you, Mrs. Marshall? If the word *old* is offensive, though I did not mean it in that sense, yet I retract it, but I must insist that you say no more to me of the past, —I peremptorily forbid it!"

She had wound him up.



"Upon my word!" thought she. "Forbid is it? I forbid the banns! One would suppose he was already my master. If ever he is, I'll soon teach him which of us is that!"

But even her blindness could not but see she was yet a very long way off from that event; but as none can tell what may not lay for them in the distance, to avoid shutting out for ever the prospect, she felt it better to smother her displeasure at Mr. Church's peremptory manner, and temporise with him a little.

"I will not again mention it," she returned, "and would not have spoken of it now, but to tell you that everything has turned out for the best, and it would be a pity to disturb the peace of a family by useless animosity and recrimination, however deserved it may be."

Mr. Church could not but confess there was some sense in this. He permitted to Mrs. Marshall what he would not have suffered in any other woman, to lecture and preach to him. But she had been in the beginning of

things a valuable assistant to him in his new district, and his friend from first to last in his suit with her daughter, and from whatever motives was the most sorry for his misfortune.

"Trust me !" she said, in conclusion ;
"Mabel would never have suited you."


"I am the best judge of that," said he, sharply.

"Nor will Sybil either, though quite different to Mabel."

"I am not asking your advice, and beg you to leave that alone."

"But I will take the privilege of an *old* friend, and just hint that there are *others* to choose from, and not far off either."

It was out ! It would puzzle him to discover whom she meant, so she gave a languishing look to help him, and in spite of his anger at her presumption, as he considered her gratuitous advice, he could not help laughing, and at that moment Robert and his daughter entered.



The latter had forgotten to remove her hat, and her face was partially concealed by the brim. Mrs. Marshall, who watched Mr. Church from under her eyes, fancied she perceived a flush in his face, as he rose to greet them.

As Sybil gave him her hand, she saw the scrutinizing look of Mrs. Marshall fixed on her; she recollected her hat, still on her head, and thought she might accuse her of making it a pretence for not sooner appearing, she took it off, and stood in her beauty before him.

"Have you been for a walk?" said he.

"I was going out when I met papa," she answered, artlessly.

She sat in modest grace apart, and Mrs. Marshall jealously observed, that as he conversed with the father, Mr. Church's glances were often directed towards the daughter, but this the girl did not perceive any more than when beside her in the railway carriage, he sat an unsuspected worshipper of the matchless countenance, turned in profile towards him.

After a reasonable time he rose to depart.

"Do not go yet!" said Robert, "unless you are obliged to; stay a little longer, and Sybil shall give us our kettle-drum: A thing I would rather see than hear."

"I do admire this new style excessively," says Mrs. Marshall, sentimentally. "I adore everything romantic."

"Romantic!" repeated Sybil, smiling, and with her hand on the bell. "I thought tea and bread-and-butter homely fare, and that was the beauty of it."

Mrs. Marshall glanced at Mr. Church, with meaning, at this proof of Sybil's odd foreign ideas, upon which she had been animadverting.

"The romance consists in the time, not in the material, I suppose," said he, much amused.

"Exactly so," returns the lady, greatly relieved in her mind, "for if he liked Sybil he would second *her*, instead of her opponent."

"Tea before dinner is a novelty, and I like it!" says she, with charming *naïveté*.

"Only the old teatime revived, and an early supper after," said Mr. Church.

"You don't say so!" exclaims Mrs. Marshall. "Old? Then I'm sure I shall hate it! I do so hate those old times; the people were all so very, very old, and so very, very ugly."

Mrs. Marshall felt she had made the impression desired; the gentleman laughed so.

"Where is Mabel?" enquired Mr. Blake; he laughed also, and thought they had had nonsense enough.

As he spoke, the door opened, and the Queen of Ringwood, arrayed in regal trappings, entered, followed by the kettle-drum.

All opened their eyes; she was armed for conquest in imperial velvet—black—rendering her snowy shoulders still more dazzling. Her arms were covered with bracelets, her fingers with rings, her neck was encircled with chains and amulets. She was a mass of jewels,

costly and magnificent. They became her, and Cleopatra herself could not have looked more radiant and superb.

"Company!" said she. "I did not know it," and she made a step as if to retreat.

"Come in, my dear!" said her husband. "I was at that moment asking for you. You have taken time by the forelock."

Mr. Church rose to offer his salutations.

"Do you know what time it is?" walking with stately grace towards her lord and master.

"Just five," he answered, "but we do not go till seven."

"Six, my dear."

"Six? Surely it was seven! Where is the note?"

"In the rack, I believe."

"I must see to that, for I have ordered the carriage for seven."

"I am detaining you," said Mr. Church.

"Not at all," was the answer. "You

must stay and take a cup of tea, if only for 'Auld Lang Syne's' sake, though he was so very old, and so very ugly."

Mrs. Marshall did not like to be laughed at, and she knit her brows.

"We take it for granted," continued her son-in-law, applying some salve, "that Auld Lang Syne was a man; we cannot permit such libels on the ladies. They never grow old."

The lady applied "the flattering unction to her (own) soul."

"Sybil, my love! what are you about?" said her father.

Mr. Church was assisting to hinder her, for there he stood with two cups of tea which she had placed in his hands, and though she told him, over and over again, which was Mrs. Marshall's and which was Mrs Blake's, for the one took sugar and other did not, yet, in repeating his lesson, he every time made the most singular mistake.

However she made him understand at last,

and she gave her papa his cup, and one to Mr. Church likewise, who stood beside her conversing, cup in hand.

A flush of mortification passed over Mabel's face.

Her power was gone, her beauty, her grandeur was lost upon him; he scarcely looked at her.

"I will go and look for the invite," said Sybil. "I really think it was seven."

"I am certain of it," returns Mrs. Marshall.

"Six or seven," said Mr. Blake; "there is plenty of time, it will not take Sybil and me long to don our things. Mabel is ready, she is always good (slily), she never keeps me waiting, and mother ready too!"

Mother! That vulgar word! If there was a thing Mrs. Marshall abominated, it was to be called that! And before Mr. Church! As if she was the mother of that old man! She had told him of it a hundred times! "Mamma" was much prettier and younger!

but Robert is such a booby ! He always forgets.

“ Me dressed ! ” she exclaimed tartly, the acid of the above rumination. “ Do you think I would go to the Bertram’s grand party such a figure as this ? ”

Mabel laughed ; she was quick to perceive the ridiculous in any shape, no matter who or what it was, friends or foes, relatives or strangers were equally objects of mirth, and Mrs. Marshall, a lady to whom the word stout could in all justice be applied, did look, as we before stated, somewhat ridiculous, a huge roly-poly, such as are made for babies, whose head you force down into its elastic body, out of which it slowly rises with prolonged groan and horrible shriek.

“ Mamma has surely brought her feather bed down,” thinks her amiable daughter.

“ Is it to the Bertrams you are going ? ” enquired Mr. Church. “ I can satisfy you as to the time ; the invitations were for seven.”

“ Are you going ? ” asked Mabel, timidly.

"I am not able to do so," he answered, still not raising his eyes to her; then addressing Mr. Blake, "it is church this evening, and I have not been able to find anyone to take the duty."

"How foolish of mamma!" thinks Mabel, "to let out where we are going to. If there is a thing I wish her not to talk about, she is sure to go and prattle of it to everyone she meets. It is fortunate that it is the church; he cannot give that up, anything else he might put aside."

It is a singular fact in the idiosyncrasy of human nature, that we arrogate to ourselves solely, all the merit arising out of our own actions, but cast the blame thereof always on other people, though equally the consequence of them.

It did not strike Mrs. Blake that her mother's loquacity was all her own doing. Dressing, as she did, to resuscitate the lambent flame of former days, it brought the why and the wherefore on the *tapis*.

Mr. Church waited a few minutes in the hope that Sybil would return, but she did not, and he took leave. She was searching everywhere for the missing billet, which was found open on Mabel's dressing-table. A proof she knew perfectly well the hour.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CREME DE LA CREME.

Mrs. BLAKE made some sage reflections on the evanescent nature of the all-absorbing passion; how, when it is past, it is past irrevocably; no art can renew it. Even between the most antagonistic elements a flame may be kindled; but once extinguished, like fires of an extinct volcano, it may, and will break out in fresh places, for its properties are smouldering within, but never in the once deserted shrine.

She took umbrage with her dress, inasmuch

that it had failed in its intention, and she, likewise, had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Church "smoked it," to use the descriptive language of these "fast days" of the nineteenth century, which, like everything from its turning point, means just contrary to what it has done since time immemorial.

She attributed to this, more than to real regard, the excessive attention he had shown to Sybil. It was only after her own entrance into the room, for before they did not appear to be on speaking terms, and, indeed, a passion so suddenly conceived, and so immediately following the mortifying failure he had experienced, would be boyish and contemptible, quite unworthy of Mr. Church.

Her mamma interrupted these cogitations over the kettle-drum, by going into ecstasies about her costume.

"Really!" said she, "there is no one like L. and A.? That dress would do for court."

Mabel intended it for courting, and the courting of favours of one kind or another,

with which the precincts of the Sovereign abound, is very likely the origin of the word.

"I should dearly like to have such a robe," continued Mrs. Marshall. "The white fall is superb, I never saw such Maltese before. What did it cost?"

"The lace? It was included in the dress."

"I mean the dress."

"I am ashamed to say, but a trousseau would not be complete without it, and for me it was really necessary, not being so young a bride, nor one for the first time."

"But you could not get a dress like that for nothing. You have enough in the train for a second. Sixty guineas?"

"Not far off; but it is the *chef de ma cuisine*. You see I sport foreign!"

"Don't sport nonsense, Mabel! I was giving Mr. Church my opinion of foreigners, and of Miss Sybil's foreign shams."

"What did he say to that?" Mabel asks, with some show of interest.

"Oh! he laughed, but I could see he

thought just as I did, he only wanted to draw me out."

"You have been quick in making your conquest, mamma! Poor Sybil, cut out on all sides!"

"She should not put herself so forward then. Did you see her indecorous laughing about the tea? I really did not know which way to look, I was so ashamed. I quite blushed for her."

"I saw you looked very red."

"No! Too red? Do you think he saw it?"

"Your red face, mamma? He seemed too *épris* for that."

"*Epris*. What's that!"

"I forgot; you do not like French. We never like what we don't understand." Seeing a look in her mother's face; "what are you going to wear, mamma dear?"

"That's just what I don't know. My patent velvet will never do beside your beauty."

"If that's all, I will wear something else. I only wanted to try the effect, and—it does not please me."

"But you are dressed?"

"Indeed not, nor near; we must make haste if we are going, Robert does not like to be late."

"What is Sybil going to wear?"

"Heaven knows! I don't, nor care either. White, perhaps, it is so sweet (sentimentally), and—and—*so* maidenly."

"I will put on white," says Mrs. Marshall.

"Sybil and I will look like your daughters."

"Norma and her two children. I will go in holding a hand of each. On second thoughts, perhaps it would be better not to put on white."

"Why not?"

Mabel did not like to say it was too young for her, there would be instantly another edition of not looking thirty, &c.

"White is Missy, more fit for bashful fifteen than fif—" She recollected in time—"than for my blooming mamma of thirty-eight."

"Mme. Recamier wore white at seventy."

"She was French."

"What difference did that make?"

"I thought you did not like anything foreign, and she was the most beautiful of the many beautiful women of that age."

"I don't know about her being so very beautiful. There are plenty as beautiful as her, I dare say, who are not seventy."

"She was not always seventy, I suppose," said Mabel, smiling. "Save the white, mother, love, to finish off Mr. Church. He will not be at the Bertram's this evening."

"I don't know that."

"How can he put off his church? Duty before pleasure, especially in matters of religion. Besides, he knows I am to be there, and would hardly like to sport himself as the veritable hero of 'rejected addresses.' He has sent his apologies long before this, you may be sure." And she mentally added "or I would put on some other dress; if it could not attract at first sight, neither will it at

second, though it be candlelight, which women are said to look best by."

Mrs. Blake was right, Mr. Church was not at the Bertram's, she ascertained that at the first glance on entering the room, leaning proudly on her husband's arm. Her mother and Sybil followed, both in white; the former however was in white silk, but well relieved with black lace and velvet hangings, took off its juvenility, and Mrs. Marshall looked very well, not at all *outrée*.

The company was very select, as the Bertram's parties always were. This time there were very few of the natives, those who like oysters stick fast to the paternal soil, just opening their shells to see and hear what is going forward, and venturing no further than the length of their line admits.

Though Mabel had lived so many years at Ringwood, yet from the cause no doubt, as previously stated, of her belonging to the new family at Ringwood, she had never before dined or visited even at the Hall, and many

now present were strangers to her, and others she only knew by sight.

Among these last were the Severn family, the great family of Ringwood Place, birds of passage, who came when its groves no longer rang with the heavenly minstrelsy of their prototypes, or the zephyrs came laden with the perfumes of "Araby the blest." The crack of the rifle dealing death to the beautiful and guiltless inhabitants of its copses and covers was their song, as the baying of hounds and the horn of the hunter signalled their later presence.

With Earl Severn and the Ladies Beverley, both Mr. Blake and Sybil were on speaking terms, and it had been no small mortification to Mabel that she herself was held of no account by them. But on her formal introduction by their hostess, Miss Bertram, it was graciously acknowledged; yet never satisfied, she still must cavil.

"If I had married 'the poor curate,' thought she, "as they consider the church-

mouse, rat from its size, I might have looked long enough before they would have seen such a nobody as '*poor* Mrs. Church;' but as mistress of Ringwood they will condescend to give me a glance, and may in time extend the tip of one of their aristocratic fingers for me to take hold of."

It did not strike the clever Mrs. Blake that all this and much more in her had its origin in envy, that others should be more elevated in the scale of society than herself.

In the inward murmurings of her covetous spirit, she could never have enough, but it is a fact that however insensible Mr. Church might be to the perfect grace with which she adorned her costly attire, the present company were not equally so. They might be too well bred to stare, but eyes so educated and familiar with the beautiful in all shapes, were not likely to lose all at once their sensibility to the attractions of a woman, for whom nature had done much and art still more.

They did her complete justice, and whispers

and comments on her appearance, all to her advantage, were abundantly made by the gentlemen (she did not care for women's admiration), though with faces averted and tones apart, as required by the laws of politeness.

This was as much as she was likely to obtain, though really the most brilliant woman in the room, but such milk-and-water logic she would have scouted, she would desire to have slaves at her feet, men devoting themselves to celibacy, to death for her sake. Be a Laura, a Leonora, a Cleopatra, the inspiration of poets, the destiny of heroes.

She was born too late for this, though not past her meridian, yet she had attained it. Twice a bride, and no longer free, she was no longer among the sweet of her sex to be wooed and won, fates consenting. She was no longer the prize for the single and ambitious of the opposite sex to run the race for. Her day was past, however unwilling she was to admit it, and she must cede her place to those who had yet the Rubicon to cross.

However blind to the effect of her own charms, Mabel was quick to perceive the impression created by Sybil, her rival, for such in truth she was considered by her.

The Smythes were there, the vicar already in conversation with her husband; Sybil rejoiced to meet her friends, Rosalind and her mother, and took her place between them. She did not feel so shy as she would otherwise have done in a room where nearly all were strangers to her, for she had not the courage to look round and see who was there.

She sat matchless in beauty, pure as she was fair, a perfect type of woman. She did not any more than Mabel perceive the effect she produced; she did not desire it, indeed gave it not a thought, but conversed cheerfully with her dear friends.

Mabel, in the covert way peculiar to her and her mother, saw it all—the glances given in her direction; and though the gentlemen might not, in the silent homage of their hearts to so divine an impersonation, utter a

word, or yet pass a remark on her, yet as they conversed in groups, eyes downcast and apparently absorbed, sought continually one object to assist in the development of their ideas.

"How fond men are," thought she, contemptuously, 'of what they call "beautiful simplicity!" Because that girl has put on that vapoury thing (tulle it was), which looks as if you could compress it into a nut shell, herself as well, they cannot take their eyes off her. I look heavy and encumbered. It's day and night with us two; I (shuddering) hideous night! Mamma was wiser than me; she looks uncommonly well."

Her ideas received a new turn when Mr. Bertram approached and introduced Lord D—— as her cavalier of the hour. He was a guest at "Ringwood Place," and had been Mr. Blake's friend abroad, and Eton comrade in days of yore.

Mabel smoothed her ruffled plumes, and laid herself out to captivate the flirt she was.

Sybil, notwithstanding her attractions, fell to the care of a married man ; but to put this against that, he was a nobleman, their neighbour Lord Severn, newly come to the title, and whose young bride Mr. Bertram had allotted to himself the pleasing task of doing honour to in his own hall.

Mrs. Marshall was especially content, for she had a live lord to act as her squire. To be candid, he was rather small for his dignity, but he made up for it in the size of his voice, which might have pertained to him who threw down the walls of Jericho, that Coventry of the Israelites, with the blast thereof.

Mr. Blake was pleased that that amiable lady of the church, Mrs. Smythe, the kind friend of his lost Nellie, should fall to his lot ; Rosalind had a sword of her country to defend her, in the shape of a gallant lieutenant ; the Vicar had the youngest lady in the room assigned to him ; whoever might have cause to be dissatisfied, it was certain she had none,

for her merry laugh broke like music upon the ear, and became infectious.

Lady Clara Beverley, a charming young lady, sister of Lord Severn, was provided with a gay baronet. With her closes our list, for though there were others, yet these suffice, and are more than belong to the purpose of our tale.

Still, when all was arranged as to partners, it seemed as if all had not arrived, and Mrs. Blake's sharp ears caught the words "Better not wait any longer," addressed by Mr. Bertram to his sister.

A flash crossed over her mind, and then disappeared; the summons was given respecting dinner, and the pairs filed of *en route* to the dining-room. In the end it was apparent that there was either one lady too many, or one gentleman too little; one cannot say which rendering will be most polite. The latter is not intended as a reflection on my Lord Caerleon, Mrs. Marshall's escort, whose voice, added to his figure, made up a reasonable sized individual.

However, the superfluous lady proved to be the lady of the house, the fair and amiable Miss Bertram, who, rather than a guest relying on her should be disappointed by the recreancy of her appointed knight, gave up her liege one, and walked in the queen of the throng, though unappropriated and unattended.

She found, however, a body of courteous cavaliers, all emulous to do her honour, and assist in the arbitrary duty of wielding her simple sceptre—to wit, the carving-knife, a sign and symbol only, for as the dinner was *à la Russe*, all cut up and handed round, Miss Bertram's sceptre was *à la ruse* too.

This lady's right and left consisted of the good Vicar and Lord Severn—this gentleman exerted his utmost to entertain his beautiful partner Sybil.

Our lovely heroine was not one to give outward demonstration, when things did not accord, and, save in the old trying ordeal of her father's marriage, she bore all her

little crosses bravely, nor made sign; but still at this moment she could not but own to unusual depression.

She had anticipated this party more than was usual with her, but, as in all things else where our expectations are much raised, the reality falls short, and disappointment, often times disgust, ensues.

Mr. Bertram and she had met frequently since their first formal introduction to each other. He improved upon acquaintance, and Sybil, modest and diffident as she truly was, could not help feeling that his manner evinced a marked admiration—quiet, earnest, and unobtrusive as befitted his character. It was also accompanied by a certain hesitation, which the wise Sybil deemed the greatest proof of his—friendship for her.

For she felt it would never do to go beyond that; she herself could never feel more than friendship for any human being. It would be dreadful infidelity in her after the past! Be untrue to her faith! Forget *him*? Never!

With sentiments such as these, it could

not be any disappointment to her that Mr. Bertram should turn away at the moment of her entrance into the room, and when aware of it, hesitate to approach her, or only so, for the purpose of introducing Lord Severn.

What consequence was it to her if the Lady Clara Beverley did sit on his left, and that he and this very attractive young lady appeared to be on such exceedingly good terms? Perhaps it was on her account he cut her, and now kept looking down the table in her direction to see how she took it!

She was not jealous, not in the least. She would despise herself could she be so mean. Mr. Bertram was nothing to her, could never be, and he had every right to do as he pleased. He cut her once. She ought to have remembered it, and maintained that dignified reserve she then resolved on. Was she not humbled sufficiently? She would turn again to that beautiful past which, though it set in darkness, still lent its radiance to guide her on her way. She would look no more.

Lord D—— had taken his place next to



her. He considered himself favoured in his position between the two belles of the present circle, and strove to prove himself worthy of his post.

Mrs. Blake saved him much trouble in this respect, for she took half his task on herself. She was an adept in the use of her tongue, and her eyes, too, which, however, were too light to be pronounced "beautiful blue eyes." But she knew very well how to use them, these balls of hers, and when she brought all the battery of her small arms into play she fancied herself irresistible.

No doubt, Lord D——, a handsome man, and the favourite of the fair, in the legitimate days of his youth, ere he took upon himself stronger ties, felt flattered by the efforts of the incomparable lady at his side to entertain him, but he certainly gave all his kind heart to his old friend Sybil. He felt for her, cut out and displaced; he saw she was not in spirits, and with such a circe for step-mother he fancied the reason not difficult to guess.

He told her that he only came over to Ringwood that morning, or he would have been in to see her father; he was one of his most valued friends; and when Sybil enquired if Lady and Miss D—— were well—

“Thank you,” he answered, “for reminding me. I am the bearer of an invitation from them. You will come and spend a few weeks with us at D——, will you not? You know you are a great favourite there. I will bring in the note. I did not know I should meet you here.”

And then, unconsciously, as if to confirm her in her resolve, he talked to her of their travels abroad, the places visited, the sights they had seen. It was reviving to the poor girl; the light of other days came back upon her, and soon she was all her own grand self.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CRE-FYDDLE.

LORD CAERLEON and Mrs. Marshall, as has been stated, were appointed partners during that most engrossing of all performances, the act of dining.

These two persons had one likeness in common, and that was a certain mistiness respecting the precise age they were at.

Their calendar somehow was at fault. It varied as the whim took it; it was very like an old watch, sometimes it was all behind-hand, and sometimes it stood still altogether.


And my Lord Caerleon was every bit as erratic in the matter of time as the lady at his side.

In those annual Registers, Lodge, Debrett, and Dobbs, Lord Caerleon's age was therein stated to be sixty.

This he denied, and his indignation at the libel was not only made known to his world of friends, but served as a never-failing topic of conversation into whatsoever company the noble lord delighted to honour with his presence.

He was very juvenile in appearance, no doubt about that; small and spare, he moved about with great celerity and a slashing air, took long strides, as though he were a fast man. He was also a poet, and when poesy took him in tow he became dreamy and abstracted.

At first sight he might be, and was frequently, taken for a little boy, but as the eye dwelt upon his countenance it was surprising how my Lord Caerleon's age developed itself!



You seemed to be looking through and through right into futurity, and became convinced that unless it were a mockery, a delusion, he must be an old boy, a very old boy, and no mistake.

"Madam," he was saying, when his prodigious voice smote upon the ear, "madam, when I become Prime Minister the first thing I do is to have that Lodge and his whole tribe hanged and their books burned. Those fellows have told more fables, madam, than any other set of men upon earth. Not one correct, depend upon it."

"Very strange," said Lord D——, "my astrological chart is all right."

"Mine likewise," added Lord Severn.

"But they make me out sixty," cries Lord Caerleon. "Sixty! just think of that! Why, that's the age of my father. What he would have been had he lived. But no one ever knew what his age was, for he was a collateral, and saved the fine old family of Caerleon from becoming extinct."

"How good of him," whispered Mabel to Lord D——, "you ought to be proud of such an addition to your ranks as his son."

"So we are, all properly grateful," was the answer.

"A fine old family," repeated Mrs. Marshall, awe struck.

"So it is, madam; you may well say that," and my Lord Caerleon appeared to forget this was a repetition of his own words. "Came over with the Conquest, madam; came over with the Conquest."

"Did they indeed?" and Mrs. Marshall seemed lost in antiquity.

We are not at all certain that this same lady knew anything about the Conquest, the people of those days were so very old, and so very ugly, that they were not worth caring about.

"You may know that by the name," says the historian.

"Dear," says the pupil, as enlightened as before.

"Caerleon means cœur-de-lion, only we drop the *d*."

My lord pronounced it English-wise, being about as great a proficient in the French language, as his admiring auditor Mrs. Marshall.

"A sweet language the French. You speak it like a native," says she.

"I have been taken for one, madam, before now. I am proud of my French descent, William the Norman! Ah! he was the man! and Caerleon is only the old cure-lions (cœur-lion) of my ancestors."

"Cure Lions?" exclaims the lady; "what in the name of goodness did they cure them of?"

"Ah! ha! ha!" roared Lord Caerleon. "This lady wants to know what my ancestors cured the lions of."

"Of their first wonder, I suppose, ma'am," answers Lord D——, quietly.

"It's a pity they gave up their calling,"

says Mabel, *sotto voce*, "some of their descendants might profit by it."

"He is not a bad fellow in the long run," was the reply, "though rather peculiar."

"Well, madam," returned the descendant of the lion-hearts, "to go on with what I was saying about Lodge and his—hm! we must not always call things by their right names. He says I am sixty, *i.e.*, I was born sixty years ago. I will ask you, or any one else whether I look sixty?"

All looked at the interlocutor, but as it was addressed generally, no one seemed entitled to answer it, except Mrs. Marshall.

"Oh, dear no!" said she, "no one could possibly say you were sixty," and remembering the "soft sawder" so efficacious in her own case, she added: "You do not look thirty, and might pass for your son's brother."

"Upon my word, madam," returns the lion rampant, "you must be an ally of that rascal Lodge, or think me confoundedly

old to have a son to compare with me! No! no! I thank you. Not quite so fast! You must go to my brother, he has lots to compare with himself or anyone else."

Mrs. Marshall was dumbfounded. He was a lord, and a single man! everything she could have wished, and she had actually put her foot in it.

"No! no!" he went on; "not come to that yet! The lady with the four requisites has not put in an appearance."

"She is a long time about it," says Lord Severn. "You must look sharp Caerleon, or you will die a bachelor after all."

"The four requisites, or no Lady Caerleon!"

"And what may be the four requisites so essential in the Lady Caerleon that is to be?" asks Mabel, with bewitching simplicity.

"The four requisites I deem paramount in the lady I seek for, are birth, fortune, youth, and beauty."

"The verses, the verses pray, Caerleon,"

says Lord Severn. "It's nothing without them, they contain the pith and marrow."

The poet smiled, ran his fingers through his hair, and with true poetic fire gave them—

"Of lineage lofty, and of castle old,
No end of bags of untold gold,
Pearl of her sex, her beauty rare,
No maiden shall with her compare.
Crown'd with sweet youth, you have it now,
Birth, fortune, beauty, youth I trow,
Unless these four coequal be
No lady is fit match for me."

"Bravo! bravo! Caerleon. Your modesty equals your merits."

"I should like to know," says an indignant old lady, standing up for her sex, "What lady possessing any one of these qualifications would have you?"

"Me, madam? Lord Caerleon! Really you surprise me! If you were a gentleman, I should deem it a point to send you the answer at the point of my sword," and he looked very big.

The figurative appearance of the little man with a long sword struck every one, and caused a general smile.

"Come, Caerleon," said Lord D——. "You must not go too far, though you are a cœur-de-lion, yet I hope we are all cœur-de-lions where the ladies are concerned, and every one will agree that Mrs. Worth (the lady who had thrown down the glove to Lord Caerleon) has proved herself worthy to represent the sex to which she belongs," and he bowed to the lady across Mabel, from whom she was separated by a chair, the empty chair which its predestined occupant came not to claim.

Lord Caerleon accepted the rebuke, and sank into his proper dimensions.

"What a happy talent is quickness of repartee," says Mabel, apart. "That turn of yours about the cœur-de-lions, after what he had said of his ancestors, was so very felicitous."

Lord D—— smiled.

"I should say," he returned; "that you possess the happy talent as you term it to perfection, but like many others are blind to your own merits."

"Oh, I too can say no end of good things, but the worst of it is, when the time for them is over and gone."

"Unfortunate that! Put them by, they may be of use some day."

"Like the odds and ends ladies collect. Oh, do listen! If those two are not at their ages again! Certainly mamma must be cracked! In all these years I never knew her to tell her real age, not even to me."

"Is speaking the truth a sign she is cracked? I should have supposed the contrary."

"In these wicked days of ours, everything is reversed. It is only those cracked who speak truth, the wise never do."

"Thank you for the lesson! There is something new under the sun."

Mrs. Blake's surprise at her mother's candour was natural—it seemed incomprehensible; but it is, nevertheless, true that she communicated the amount of years she had numbered to the edification of the assembled

guests, and to Lord Caerleon in particular, but whether it was a slip of the tongue or not, is a question.

It came about this wise :

Lord Caerleon was fond of setting small traps to catch ladies' weaknesses, and the amount of game entrapped caused him no small amusement.

How it commenced this deponent cannot set forth, it matters little, but the conversation between Lord Caerleon and Mrs. Marshall reverted once more to his age, and the libels, and he was saying—

“As for all that nonsense about people denying their age, it's regular humbug! Anyone can tell your age, and suppose you do pretend you are ten or twenty years younger, you cannot pretend to stand still, and must confess yourself at last the age you so much detested.”

“Very true,” responded Mrs. Marshall; “I never make a secret of mine, and don't mind who knows it. I was *fifty-eight* last birthday.”

"Well, madam, I admire your courage in confessing yourself at that age; few ladies would have done it. I never knew one to do the same."

"What age?" enquires Mrs. Marshall, with a bewildered look.

"Fifty-eight! I don't know that I should have taken you to be so old. Ladies' ages are difficult to guess; what with their paints, and their enamels, and their false hair, and all that sort of thing, they get themselves up surprisingly. They have the advantage of us poor men. I don't blame them for it. But it is difficult to hide the wrinkles of sixty."

"Sixty!" exclaimed Mrs. Marshall, aghast.

"I am not sixty!"

"Fifty-eight is not far off."

"I have been told that I don't look thirty, and am more like my daughter's sister," and poor Mrs. Marshall felt herself aground.

"False, madam," returns her persecutor.

"You must not believe everything that is told you."

"A rule I rigidly adhere to," says Mabel, in towering anger, roused up to defence of her mother; "and, therefore, prefer to believe Lodge, when he says a man is sixty, let the sexagenarian deny it as he will."

Lord Caerleon stared for a moment at his new aggressor, and seemed rather taken aback by her wondrous beauty, heightened as it was by her flashing eyes and brilliant colour.

"I would ask, madam," said he more subdued, "who you are that attack me unprovoked?"

"I am the daughter of the lady beside you," she answered, with imperial dignity, and the gentlemen did homage to her by rapping the table with their knuckles.

Lord Caerleon succumbed to the general voice, which was against him.

"No man is expected to stand against three; and when they are ladies, the odds are still greater, so I cry 'Peccavi.'"

"I suspect that you have put the extinguisher on the enemy," said Lord D——,

in an aside to Mabel. "He will not flare up again this evening."

"I fear you thought me very rude."

"Not in the least. I admired your spirit."

"And all this because the hapless Lodge was so indiscreet as to make public his age—for he is that?"

Lord D—— made a sign of assent.

"I often wonder why such a record is kept," says Mabel, with beautiful simplicity again.

"Only a peppercorn we pay in token of the lands we hold; but for this, our chronology would be of no more account than other people's, I fancy."

"It's nice to be rich," says Mabel, girlishly.

"Is it?" returns Lord D——, amused.

"Do you ask it?"

"I do, indeed! I want to know in what wealth consists. Riches are only by comparison. What is affluence to one is poverty to another."

"But if you are rich, you can do so much,

or, rather, you need not do anything. Virtue and goodness are ready made for you."

"How is that?"

"Surely you know?"

"Indeed not. Instruct me!"

"If you are rich, your virtue is accepted as a matter of course. You are the good boy of the story-book, rewarded because you are so good."

"What a shame there are so many naughty boys in the world! It's all their own fault it seems."

Mabel coloured.

"I'm afraid the good boys get more than their share," said she, resolved not to be beaten.

"Then, it's not all gold that glitters, and they are not so good as they ought to be?"

"Tell me! Is not the proverb—'To him that hath shall be given,' certified in the rich?"

"It is very often."

"If one man possesses an enormous fortune,

some kind, admiring friend, is sure to die and leave him another."

"Very obliging of him. Perhaps he thought his own less likely to be wasted."

"But who minds him and his thoughts? He has done so, and that's a fact, and the happy recipient reaps all the honours; he is praised and courted, his favour propitiated, and his path strewn with admiring worshippers."

"Interested ones, I fear."

"Interest governs the world," returns Mabel. "And yet for these he may do nothing, give nothing; his name is sufficient, his shadow is more than humbler individual's substance, and even in the small matter of presents, the rich never make them."

Lord D—— was infinitely diverted by Mabel's tirade.

"Who makes all the presents then?" he asked, by way of keeping her up to the mark.

"The poor make them. Poverty must do that to pass current."

"But if they have nothing?"

"Out of their nothingness, to be sure."

"You have taught me a lesson," said her pupil, laughing. "I shall be careful in future how I make presents, lest I be suspected of being as poor as I am; but I would ask from whence comes your knowledge? By intuition, I suppose, like genius. You cannot have learned it from experience, I feel sure, and my friend Blake is as well off as man needs be."

"Or perhaps I would not have had him," returns Mabel, with a wicked look.

"Then you do not approve of love matches?"

"Marry in haste, and repent at leisure," answers she.

"What do you say to a young friend of ours, who, the other day, stepped out of her rank and married a poor curate, a worthy fellow, I believe—"

"The good boy," says Mabel, slyly.

"Yes; the good boy, with every virtue

under Heaven; the greatest in the lady's eyes, the poverty you so much condemn."

"Horrible!" exclaims Mable, in mock affright. "And a clergyman's wife must dabble in poverty to the end of her days. I should have said to her, 'Look before you leap!'"

"As you did, Mrs. Blake!" said a voice low yet distinct, that it caught the attention of everyone, and, for a moment, there was a dead silence, and all eyes were directed towards Mabel.

She gave a stifled cry, and, turning, beheld Mr. Church at her side, his glittering eyes fixed on her face. She gazed as if fascinated, and turned deadly pale, a faintness stole over her; fearful of a scene, with a vigorous effort she shook the demon, whatever it was, from off her.

"You here, Mr. Church?" said she; "I did not know it! Though you may have been sitting there all the time like an evil spirit invisible."

“Why should the good care for the presence of evil spirits, or the sight of them, like horrible poverty, be too much for a woman’s nerves?”

“Your questions are so abstruse,” she answered, ironically, “that they require the wise men of the east to answer them; and let me remind you” (with playful raillery) “that a dinner party is the worst possible place to discuss them.”

But though she tried to turn it off thus lightly, yet she could not recover from the surprise his unlooked for appearance occasioned her; for the rest of the dinner she continually dropped into reverie, wondering when or how he came there. She had been so absorbed in her purpose of withdrawing Lord D——’s attention from Sybil and concentrating it on herself, that she had had no eyes or ears for anything else. She had a dim recollection of some movement respecting the empty chair beside her, but when it was she could not determine. One thing certain, he

had heard her foolish tirade about the horrors of poverty, and had applied it as the moving spring of her conduct towards himself.

“It was all very true, and he had no business to be poor. Why did he not get rich like other people? Still she did not exactly care for him to know her opinion, for he could be malicious.”

It appeared as if a portion of Mrs. Blake's discomposure had communicated itself to the other guests, for there was much less hilarity and sparkle than before the coming in of Mr. Church. They spoke as if unwilling to break the silence which suddenly pervaded the room, and even Lord Caerleon's big voice subsided into something more commensurate with his size.

Mr. Smythe tried to rouse them up, he was fearful of falling asleep, and bending across the table thus addressed his late curate—

“A full congregation, Church?”

“One only,” was the answer.

"I can guess who that was," says Mabel with sudden sprightliness ; " deaf Miss Dummy."

The next instant she shrank into herself, for though Mr. Church paid marked attention to what she said, yet he vouchsafed not a reply.

" Did you have service for *her*?" asked the Vicar.

Mr. Church had caught sight of two black eyes far up the opposite side, looking anxiously towards him. The proprietor of those same eyes was conscious that something had discomposed him, and feared he might be offended with them—with her, good, and innocent, and pretty Fanny Rosalind Smythe.

Unconsciously to himself his stern lips relaxed into the ghost of a smile.

" I offered to do duty for her separate be-hoof," he answered at last; " but she declined, and I then made my way hither, trusting to Miss Bertram's kindness to pardon my tardiness in consideration of the cause."

And Miss Bertram smiled her answer.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ALONZO THE BRAVE, AND THE FAIR IMOGEN.

DURING the *entr'acte*, when ladies and gentlemen disappear from each other's sight, the former assembled in Miss Bertram's drawing-room, amused themselves as best they might.

Some of this lady's intimate friends were accustomed in private to assert that her select *ré-unions* were the most wearisome things imaginable, and this same hour, a very penance for their sins.

They said their dear friend Miss Bertram was too young to receive, she did not under-

stand it, she never tried to make people sociable, never introduced them to each other.

One would aver that she was wedged up into a corner, from whence she did not emerge the whole evening.

Another, that she always took a book, went to sleep over it, and was never found out.

These were some of 'the renderings of "dearest friends," but there were others, not exactly accounted such, who would instance Miss Bertram's parties as some 'of the most pleasant of their kind, free from the persiflage, vulgar gossip, silly twaddle, and ill-bred by-play, which too often mars the grace of Englishwomen in society.

The young men were not accustomed to term Miss Bertram's entertainments "slow," and they are authorities in such matters.

They are quite capable of appreciating the good, the beautiful, and the modest of the opposite sex, as witness their choice of partners for life. They may be, and very likely are for the moment, tickled and amused by

the froth of the frivolous and satirical, but it soon tires, especially when, the rest finished off, they know their turn comes next, aye, often ere the door has closed on them.

Mrs. Blake complained of feeling unwell, and looked very different to the brilliant woman that entered the room a few hours previous.

Mrs. Marshall was secretly reproaching herself for her folly in telling her age to that "impertinent old man," as she mentally termed the representative of the ancient house of Caerleon, "for him to make a laughing stock of her! She must have been mad!"

But for this she might have enjoyed herself extremely. Such rank as was there she had never before consorted with, and she really had reason to be content, for there were others to keep her in countenance, even at fifty-eight, and always the lady, she did not lack conversation, though it might not be with those who did not look thirty.

Drawn together by the magnetic attraction

of youthful feeling, Lady Clara Beverley, Sybil, and Miss Bertram, were disporting themselves in the conservatory, vying with the beauteous flowers therein, challenging comparison with them, and bearing away the palm as fairest, where all are fair.

A few steps removed was Mrs. Worth, the lady who had asserted the dignity of her sex.

"I am here, Miss Bertram," said she, "breaking the tenth commandment again."

"Coveting my poor camellias," was the lively reply. "My one little ewe-lamb, it's too bad, and you so rich! (turning to Sybil). There is great rivalry between Mrs. Worth and me about our flowers, but I cannot equal her, save in my camellias."

And she introduced Sybil.

"You are fond of flowers?" asked the latter.

"I love them," answered Mrs. Worth, "as I love the beautiful in all things, and you?"

"I admire them excessively, but do not give them the attention I ought."

"You have other employments now, save this one for old age."

"Dear! how very strange!" cries Lady Clara.

"That old people should care for flowers?" asked Mrs. Worth, with a smile.

"Forgive me! But I thought old people never cared for anything. They only thought how soon they must die."

Mrs. Worth laughed.

"Very natural at your age, I thought the same then. But old people do think of something else, and I can truly say that I never really appreciated the works of nature till I became what you, Lady Clara, could call old."

"But tell me," urged the young aristocrat, who was of an enquiring turn of mind, "what is it to be old?"

"I can hardly tell. You are not so much conscious of it within yourself as without. You learn it more from others, but the knowledge is not painful, for experience brings philosophy with it."

“ But are you not always thinking it is no use doing this, that, or the other, for to-morrow you may—not be alive?”

“ They are very near their end who think that, my dear. Not otherwise with those who have health. The chances are not in favour of the old, but still the young, the fair, those we least expect, are cut off, while the old, like some withered tree, remain. I believe that if you live to be old, you will find that as you sow so you will reap; if you have made good use of your time in the past, you will find that with age, the higher faculties will remain to you, your judgment be sounder, while your appreciation of the good and true be more discriminating and intense. Perhaps you may not feel so strong to battle with the world, if such arises—and—” she turned away.

“ And—what else?” says Lady Clara, who had paid marked attention.

“ I have preached enough, my dear, surely.”

“ Oh, but you must finish! Do you not say so?” appealing to her companions.

"Do!" said Miss Bertram, "if it is proper for us to hear."

"You wicked one!" says Mrs. Worth, "it is nothing; I only meant that perhaps you feel you have no future, but then it only makes you value the present still more."

"Ah! There it is!" exclaims her fair examiner, "To have nothing to look forward to!"

"In this world, mind!"

"In this world I mean! No one to care for, or love you! oh I hope I shall never live to be old."

"But if a certain person should live to grow old too."

The conscious listener's face was suffused with a rosy blush.

"Will *he* ever grow old?" said she ponderingly.

"Can Cupid grow old you would say. To be sure he can and will too?"

"Look—look like some old gentleman I know?"

"Like my Lord Caerleon for instance; he was young once."

"Dreadful!" ejaculates the young girl. "If I could think such a thing."

"Don't! Plenty of time before you, and where is the use, when the glance of an eye can drive your maiden resolves to the winds," and Mrs. Worth laughed mischievously.

"I am afraid it is you who have been wicked," says Miss Bertram.

"Was she not wicked to Lord Caerleon?" cries Lady Clara, recovering her vivacity. "He will never forgive her, or me, either for laughing as I did."

"I think I ought to apologize to Miss Bertram," said Mrs. Worth, "perhaps I did wrong to speak as I did; but really I could not help it, I had no patience with him, and three such pretty young ladies as yourselves at table. Three graces! you ought to be photographed as you stand."

"My Lord Caerleon did not see us with your kind eyes," and Sybil was the spokeswoman.

"More shame for him!" and the grand lady was ready again to commence fight at the remembrance of his vanity. "It was too bad; I was only at the moment thinking I had never seen so many lovely faces at one dinner-party."

Our three graces, and as many more as could get in, were still in the conservatory when the gentlemen came in from the dining-room. A group of these immediately mounted guard at the entrance to this blissful paradise, gazing with wishful eyes on the houris within, and, Peri like, longing to enter. But there was no room for them. One only was so bold as to bid defiance to the prohibitory barricades, erected by the costumes of the fair.

This was Mr. Bertram, the lord of that same paradise.

He entered in quest of his sister!

How affectionate brothers are on occasions such as these!

His appearance caused some commotion, as



though he were a dreadful hornet entering a hive of diligent bees; when he got in, he seemed to approve of the honey, nor made attempt to return from whence he came, nor did the busy bees attempt to drive him out, but stood conversing with him, as though hornets were not such bad fellows after all.

Now he had come, Miss Bertram began to look about her, and on harmony bent, baton in hand, *i.e.* her fan, she beat up for votaries to her piano.

It is incredible to what straits she was reduced; colds sprang up impromptu for the occasion, a sudden epidemic, especially with the young ladies who sang; the few not actually under the influence of the catarrh suffered from hoarseness consequent, so as effectually to prevent them from having the pleasure, &c., &c.

Miss Bertram had no resource left, but to obey the maxim, "if you want a thing done, go and do it yourself."

She did so. She went to the piano, trusting

to the skill of music to cure the anti-musical-enza, and bring a chorus of pipers round her.

Miss Bertram was not mistaken. First one followed, then another, and soon the conservatory, late so full of houris that they trod on one another's garments, became so vacant, that it more resembled a deserted village, a statuary group of the graces alone remaining to tell what once had been.

Of this group, Mabel had replaced the lost pleiad, Miss Bertram.

She and the young Countess Severn had made up a friendship; the latter liked her appearance, and admired her magnificent jewellery, all new, and elaborately set, though surpassed in some respects by the Severn heir-looms; yet the settings, *passé* and quaint, were a drawback in the eyes of the bride, and deteriorated much from their value in her estimation.

She had, however, left the conservatory, and stood by the piano with Lord D——.

Mr. Church was one of the last of the

gentlemen Peris to quit the gates of his paradise; he would fain have entered, Mabel knew why, and knew why he did not, and that was why she remained, to complete the trio of why's.

She was resolute he should not come in if she could prevent it; she entered the lists against him now, she no longer desired to conciliate him, or cared for his regard or his anger. She would be his sworn foe henceforth, and circumvent him at every turn, and, moreover, he should not marry Sybil.

Mr. Church, foiled by the wicked fairy who was keeping guard over his beautiful princess, turned disconsolate away, and went and sat down by his friend Rosalind Smythe.

That little girl had been nailed to her mamma's side the whole evening—the gallant lieutenant in vain tried to get up a little flirtation with her; but she had no heart for anything, and looked like some poor terrified bird, that had taken refuge under the parent's wing. We fear that if her thoughts had been

legible, their substance would not have been favourable to the excessive entertainment of Miss Bertram's distinguished party; perhaps she was one of the detractors before mentioned, for certain it is she was continually reminding her mamma in soft whispers how late it was! It must be time to go home.

But at the presence of Mr. Church, Time changed his aspect as she did her own; a brighter glow warmed her cheek, and her dark eyes flashed delight. By the amiable vicaress Mr. Church had always been held in regard, and he esteemed her highly, and was less self-asserted with her than perhaps any other human being.

While in the conservatory, it seemed to Mabel that she would be ably assisted in her purpose of revenge upon Mr. Church by Mr. Bertram.

Though the Lady Clara Beverley and he appeared such very good friends, it was easy for the practised woman of the world to perceive that it was but the flicker of the torch

of a very young love, flirtation, while towards Sybil his manner savoured of little less than adoration. He might listen to the one, pass the light badinage, and be duly sensible of the honour of the fair Clara's smiles, but there was not a word uttered by Sybil, nor a movement she made, but the hawk's eyes of love did not take note of.

Whether it was in accordance with her resolve to shut up her heart, or considered it right that Lady Clara should take precedence of her, Sybil certainly was more reserved towards Mr. Bertram, and when Mrs. Blake took up the conversation, she appeared to be of my Lord Caerleon's opinion, that three to one was too much for any man, especially when the preponderance was ladies, and she moved away—she could not pass into the drawing-room, for the pygmalion statues blocked the way.

So she turned her attention to the flowers, examining them on each side, and when she came to the end of the stage, she stood at the

door, open to the garden, and looked out on the night ; she wished much she might venture forth into the calm moonlight, the air was so pure and fresh after the heated-rooms. The thought had scarcely birth when a light touch on her cheek directed her attention elsewhere.

It was only a loose trailer of a passion flower above her head ; sporting in the night-wind, it had wafted against her cheek ; the flower was on it, and raising her arm, she drew it down to examine it.

She was roused by the voice of the Vicar, he was at the door.

“Miss Blake,” said he, “I have not been able even to say, ‘How do you do?’ to you.”

She looked smilingly at the speaker, flower in hand, but he was not alone, Mr. Church was with him, and looking at her ; something in his look made her colour deeply, it was a bad habit of hers—At the same moment Mr. Bertram spoke to her, he was at her side,

asking if she would like to have the flower she still held.

"It would be a pity," said she, and let it go.

The next moment the trailer was cut and presented to her; she could not refuse it.

Mr. Church had entered, the eyes of the two young men met, and they knew each other to be rivals.

"Thanks!" said Sybil, "How beautiful! It is an alata," and she passed it into the noëud of her berthe, and then joined Mr. Smythe, and escorted by him, she returned into the drawing-room, her two adorers following.

Mabel had in the meantime disappeared from the conservatory, in company with Lady Clara.

She was in mortal dudgeon with Mr. Church for his presumption, as she chose to consider it, and with Sybil for her indelicate encouragement of a man who had been her mother's lover! she would speak to Robert,

and Mr. Church should be forbidden the house; Mr. Bertram was a much more proper person, there were none of these objections with him that attended the other, but like the weak vain creature she (Sybil) was, those very objections were the greatest attractions in her eyes.

These cogitations passed through her mind, as she stood by the piano, her love of music intact.

Miss Bertram's performance had long ceased, not so the spirit of harmony evoked.

However strange the sudden hoarseness that seized on the singers while in the conservatory, it was not more sudden than its disappearance,—they must have left it in there, for those who remained to profit by it.

"I'll try! I'll try," was the answer to a second appeal of the mistress of the house, and they did try, and found to their surprise their voices had returned to them, "it was singular."

Mabel was criticising in no kindly spirit

the rendering of some of the fair performers ; "murder of music " was her private opinion of it, and she fancied her teeth were on edge.

"Will you not sing, Mrs. Blake?"

Again she started. It was Mr. Church who spoke, the Mr. Church of old, his voice modulated to tones once so familiar to her, only he called her by a different name, not the "Mabel," of former days, or she could have cheated herself into the belief that they had returned.

She raised her eyes to him. He did not smile as then, but it was not anger or revenge that met her eyes; he was naturally grave, but she thought he looked paler, and the lines of his face harder than in those times, and a twinge of conscience smote her.

"I have not been asked," she answered, with much softness, "But if I am, is there any song in particular you would wish to hear?"

"Thank you," said he, "I should like to hear again my favourite. 'Angels ever bright and fair,' " and he smiled grimly.

It was not long before the request was made.

"Mrs. Blake!" said Miss Bertram, timidly, for somehow the young lady was half afraid of her, and she had fancied she was affronted about something, "I am told you sing, may I ask you?"

"With pleasure," was the answer, "though it is long since I sang."

"Have you your music? or is there anything in my portfolio?"

"You have a piece there, but it must be twenty years since I last sang it," and she laughed.

It was Mr. Church who arranged her music for her.

Sybil loved to hear her step-mother sing, and this same gem of Handel's was her delight, and she came to her side.

"What brings you here?" thinks Mabel, recking little of the heavenly words, nor ever dreaming of applying them to her step-daughter, "There! if she has not driven him away!"

It was true. He had moved off, but only to where he could better behold *his* angel ever bright and fair, standing in rapt adoration of the divine strains, with the passion flower on her breast.

Mr. Church's eyes as well as his ears were ravished.

If Mrs. Blake had not sung as she said for twenty years, her voice was all the better for the rest; she won the hearts of the company, for there is a charm in an eloquent voice, which like eloquence itself, carries away captive those within the sphere of its influence.

The room was silent; not a sound, save the ticking of the time-piece, distinctly audible, beating time, like a De Costa or an Arditi.

All can understand Handel, sweet and tender in song, sublime and majestic in chorus. On he goes—

“Through wand’ring skies enormous stalks along,” forceful and resistless; his is the music of the Gods, and he the God of music.

Handel, Mozart and Beethoven, immortal triad—nor them alone, shades of Haydn, Meyerbeer, Weber, Rossini, they and their brethren rise, a deathless choir. For them the grave is not. They dwell with us, breathe to us, pour into our raptured ears their fulness of song, as when in corporeal form they moved among us, existent ever in the spirit of harmony pervading the universe.

Mabel received due honour for the pleasure she had given.

On quitting the instrument, Mr. Church brought her a cup of tea, and stood conversing with her.

"You sing?" said Mr. Bertram, addressing Sybil, near whom he had been standing.

"I dare not say so after Mabel," she answered.

"But I have had the happiness of hearing you."

"I am afraid my courage is not equal to the occasion just now," said she smiling, and blushing.

“Heavenly modesty !” thought he.

It was but the same feeling that produced the shocking hoarseness in the conservatory, and which excited no admiration in you Mr. Bertram, but differently expressed, and clad in so beauteous a seeming it was irresistible.

“Oh, Thomas !” said his sister, coming up, “I can’t find any one—will you, Miss Blake ? How kind !”

She took it for granted, and Sybil in for it, yielded gracefully to the brother’s entreaty, and sang in her own sweet and simple manner that delicious air of Mozart’s, “Vedrai Carino.”

If the rendering of her song was less artistic than Mabel’s it was not less harmonious, nor did it give less delight ; she was called on to repeat it by the worshippers surrounding her, and of course among such, it would not do for the church to be absent.

Mabel was disgusted, she had not thought she would sing, especially after her, but “to

sing like that!" obtain an encore, and carry off Mr. Church, were unpardonable crimes.

If this gentleman could have had his wish Miss Sybil would have had to sing it a third time; but when the song was over, the soft sounds must have still lingered round her, and still held her listeners in thrall!

Lady Severn summoned up courage, and played Benedict's "Where the bee sucks" beautifully; and a gentleman, an amateur, followed her with Thalberg's "Home, sweet home," played as only men can play when music is their passion.

Sybil could not pay the attention she wished to this; Lord Caerleon was within ear—gun-shot would be more descriptive of his colloquial capacities, and the lively Lady Clara had him in her toils, and he was made to come out.

"Do listen," said Lord D—— to Sybil; "those two are worth hearing." Then to Mabel and Lady Severn, who had approached,

"I never care much for men's performance; they ought to leave that to the ladies."

"The ladies can't complain this evening," answered Mabel; "they have had every opportunity of exhibiting."

"And have excelled," returns the chivalric nobleman, "as they always do when the opportunity is given to them. Do you hear them?"

This was addressed to Sybil, who needed not the reminder, nor anyone else either, for the voices "obtruded themselves on the ear."

"Oh! my Lord, do pray repeat those beautiful lines you were reciting at dinner; I could not hear them very well."

And the charming Lady Clara was spokeswoman.

"What, about the lady and the four requisites?"

"Yes, those."

"I will send you a copy."

"Oh! pray tell me, now; they have got

into my head, and I shall not sleep to-night. I adore poetry."

"Adorable Lady Clara! your slave obeys."

And with all the force and fire of poetic genius, my Lord Caerleon, with much action, proceeded to deliver the lines which had erst delighted the dinner-table,

"Of lineage lofty, and of castle old—"

"There are a great many old castles, all in ruins, I believe," says Lady Clara, "so they will not be difficult to find."

"Not at all! but I don't want ruins, I have got one of my own, and if that's all the lady's got, she may keep it. This is only a poetical figure for ancestry."

"Now I understand. Please go on."

"No end of bags of untold gold."

"They will do to mend the old castle with," remarks Lady Clara. "Only it's a wonder she has not patched up her own."

"I'll patch up mine, it's getting terribly shabby."

"Like Ragland, I suppose."

"Not quite so bad; though, between you and me, Lady Clara, I'm often in a quiver of windy nights."

"You'll have the old tower laying his head on the state bed, some day. That's not all?"

"Oh, no! not near."

"Pearl of her sex! her beauty rare—"

"A pearl of that size would be valuable; worth bags of gold in itself."

"That's true, Lady Clara, but I could not change her into gold, and how should I patch up my old Ragland, as you call it."

"Build a nice new house instead; castles are dreary places."

"I cannot believe my ears."

"Don't my lord! your poetry is more pleasing to mine. The next—"

"No maiden shall with her compare."

"That's not flattering to us poor maidens, my lord; you ought to say 'saving ladies present.'"

"That would be making it too long, as it is I shall never get to the end, if I am to give—

"Forgive me, I'll not be so rude any more."

"Crown'd with sweet youth, you have it now,
Birth, fortune, beauty, youth I trow,
Unless these four co-equal be,
No lady is fit match for me."

"Is that all your own, my lord?" and my Lady Clara never looked more innocent.

"All! I wrote every word of it."

"You are quite a poet, then?"

"I flatter myself I am. I have written heaps upon heaps!"

"As good as this?"

"I should say so; but one is not a judge, you know."

"It is a pity, my lord, you do not publish," says Mrs. Marshall.

She had forgiven him already; he had not intended to go so far, and had been trying to make the *amende honorable*, nor found the lady too cruel.

"So I did, madam," he returned, "I pub-

lished under the title 'Byron Redivivus!' I published under that title."

"Good news!" says Mabel, archly, to Lord D——. "They say the sun of poetry set with Byron. We must rejoice to find he has risen again."

"'Oh, what a falling off is there!'" returned Lord D——.

"Byron Redivivus?" asks Mrs. Marshall. "Who was he, my lord?"

"Myself, madam. I am successor to Byron (turning to Lady Clara). If you would like a copy, since you adore poetry, I shall be happy to present you with one."

"Thank you! If you have one to spare."

"To spare! That I have. The whole of the first edition. Five hundred volumes now on my library shelves, except a few I have given to friends."

"They did not sell?"

"Not one. The fact is, the people are stupid, they won't believe in Byron Redivivus."

"What a shame!" exclaimed Mrs. Marshall.

"So it is! That fellow Byron spoiled the market."

"I never liked Byron," says Mrs. Marshall, loftily, "He's too—too—" Mrs. Marshall could not recollect what belonged to too.

"Too prosy?" suggests the rival poet.

"Just so!" returns the lady approvingly. "I could never understand his flighty—flighty—"

"I suspect you would like Byron Redivivus much better. Though I wrote him, yet I will say, without vanity, that there is no nonsense about him."

"Can you direct me, my lord," says she, bashfully, "where I could obtain a copy?"

"Madam! you seem a lady of taste, and I shall be happy to give you one also (addressing Lady Clara) and that *must* be the last, I shall give them all away, else."

"That would be a pity, for five hundred volumes must make a great display on the shelves."

"So they do; as well them as any other. They have the best right to be there."

"And you seem to be such a great poet, for no one would guess they were the same thing over and over and over again."

"That's very true," replies the hero of five hundred volumes, then lowering his voice, "What are those people here so merry about? they have been he-heing away this last half-hour."

"I will enquire if they are laughing at us," says Lady Clara.

"Impossible! They could never do that, and we so quiet; but (very confidentially), who is that girl standing by the sharp woman with the trinkets on? D—— is speaking to her; between you and me I saw at the first glance she has two of my requisites."

"She is Miss Blake, and I can tell you you may look long for her equal."

"No? About the bags of gold!"

"She is an heiress."

"You don't say so! and the lineage?"

"Ringwood is as old as the hills. The old house will do for the old castle."

"Bless my soul! suppose I have found her at last. I shall look her up. Fifty-eight is the great grandmother, is she not? I had better improve my acquaintance in that quarter."

Mrs. Marshall would have died, had she heard this. She had moved discreetly out of the way, not to be suspected of undue curiosity, when Lord Caerleon desired to impart his private thoughts to the fair Lady Clara only.

She was ecstatically happy. She had made a conquest of a nobleman and a poet, and would be celebrated by him in the next five hundred "Byron Redivivus." The commencement had not been propitious, but it had been said it was better to begin with a little aversion. It was a pity she told her age.

"Home, sweet home!" was accepted as a hint by the guests, to go and partake of its sweets, for, on the conclusion of the beautiful performance, the ceremony of cloaking, and ordering carriages commenced.

Mr. Blake had been especially content this evening; the gentlemen of the neighbourhood had long regarded him as an acquisition and, as he affirmed, he had scarce ceased speaking, from the moment of his entrance into the house.

He rejoiced also to see his dear daughter, an object of so much interest, and had some apprehension that she might be abducted from before his very eyes, as they stood in the picturesque old hall, waiting their turn to depart, surrounded by a body of admiring swains, ambitious of her smiles and farewell words.

Two it was evident to the initiated were ready to draw swords, mythical ones we hope, for the bliss of escorting her to the carriage, and these were Mr. Bertram and Mr. Church, each looking very determined.

But papa, cruelly ignorant, and blind we must add, though so recently in the frying-pan himself, settled the matter, before the weapons figurative, were quite unsheathed.

“Church!” said he, “Here’s the carriage!
Can we give you a lift?”

He turned to answer.

And lo! the apple was snatched from out of his very hand, and carried off by his rival; the passion flower he had presented to his houri, peeped out of the folds of her wrapper; it was hanging its head like a forlorn damsel, which Sybil did not in the least resemble.

The victor held his breath though, when he saw the enemy as he thought about to enter the citadel, and regain possession.

But the master of the “turn out,” to be turned out on to the box!

Mr. Church was not equal to such gracelessness; the finger of scorn would have been pointed at him as he went along, figurative fingers like the swords, it being dark, and the finger-post being the only one likely to be on the road at that hour.

“No,” said Mr. Church, “I will sit on the box, and then I shall not disturb the ladies, when I get out at the turning.”

It was a great self-denial on the part of our gentleman. His remorseless enemy gave a sigh of relief, and with a "Good night," and a last look at one particular corner of the carriage, he turned to resume duty as grand chamberlain to his fair and departing guests.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE JUMPER OF RHODES.

SYBIL had often pictured to herself the future of her life, when divested of its small dignity as Lady Chatelaine of Ringwood.

The greatest difference, she fancied, would be in having no dinner to order! That daily ordeal to be undergone by mistresses of families, and which, if some, who like Sybil, with ample means, find trying and impossible when the table is small, always to avoid that skeleton in the cupboard, "cold mutton," what must those suffer whose table is large

and purse small, poverty being their skeleton in the cupboard.

Sybil could not but confess, that with the surrender of the keys of her store-room, she lost all her importance in the eyes of her father's household. An ex-queen, no longer worshipped by "them parricides," as her cook was wont to designate her horde of retainers who assailed *her* as *their* Lady Bountiful. Sybil's power over the purse strings gone, she, in her turn, was laid on the shelf; became, perhaps to some, a skeleton in the cupboard, and was considered of less account than if she had never held the reins of government.

But the great effort of nature—her chief occupation apparently—is to restore the balance of power, no matter how insignificant the object; whatever is taken away must be replaced, even to robbing Peter to pay it to Paul, and the real by the ideal, if nothing else can be found.

Sybil had consoled herself in days gone by

with the reflection of the enormous space of time she would have at her own disposal. No longer surveillance to exercise over the too oft refractory band composing her father's establishment, and, hard trial, keep them to their duties. No more giving of parties in her own name, or be involved in such an endless succession of small and great affairs, arising out of her position, that no time was left her for intellectual culture or personal accomplishment.

The puzzle would be how to fill up her days, and turn them to the best purpose; and she laid down plans, and made memorandums, Alfred-wise, of what employment each hour of the day should be devoted to.

But when the time arrived, she was as often tempted to cry as to laugh at the ignorance and simplicity these mems of hers denoted.

It is true, she had no longer the heavy responsibility devolving on her of ordering dinner; it would have been a much easier

task, now there were double the number to provide for, and the new comers were more extravagant and luxuriant in their tastes than she and her father, whose simple fare oftener represented the characteristic beefsteak and mutton-chops, varied by mutton-chops and beefsteak.

But though shorn of her honours, and becoming the perfect nonentity she expected, she was not in her own actions one atom more free; in parting with her supposed thralldom, she parted also with her independence.

Her step-mother was a born worry; she not only stripped her of every vestige of the authority she once held in her father's house—and it had been gracefully yielded up when the time came—but this was not enough; she must likewise give up body and soul, time and occupation.

Sybil had it in her heart to write some little record of her travels, while the memory of them was still fresh and clear; her father was

at hand to assist and correct; her own pencil had illustrated as her notes to build upon.

Those enchanting visions were doomed as yet to be but "the airy nothings of a day dream."

Mabel's desire at first was to exhibit herself to admiring neighbours as the tender friend and companion, rather than the "mother" her new relative so much required.

"Where is Sybil?—my Sybil?" she would ejaculate, lovingly; "I am lost without her. She is my right hand; she teaches me my duties in my new sphere. I do hope she will soon have a wider scope for the exercise of her abilities."

Simple, inexperienced Mabel was a sucking dove in the presence of her husband and friends.

Petted at first, Sybil yielded to the fetters of the apron-string cheerfully; indeed, she was hardly conscious of them. They folded round her more as the evolutions of some silken sash; but in the course of time, especi-

ally on the appearance of Mr. Church, she became sensible of undue pressure somewhere, and to fancy her sash was becoming too tight for her.

Nor was this all; in time she became conscious of a certain supervision exercised over her and her actions. Her stepmother and Mrs. Marshall here acted in concert, and were always on duty, either conjointly or separately, to relieve guard.

As she was not plotting treason, or meditated aught against the governors of the small state of Ringwood, she paid little heed to it, save in the utter frustration of her hopes and aspirations in the arena of literature. It was this she felt most, and, next, to find herself all but a prisoner in her father's house; she who had possessed the "sesame" of all doors, could scarce quit one now without a permit, and a lengthy detail of her intentions and movements.

Since her father's marriage Sybil had found her stock of acquaintance diminish consider-

ably. To all those especial to herself Mabel made unqualified objections—Miss Goodboye was one.

For many reasons Sybil held her in regard, and valued her friendship, but Mabel, though she gained the victory over her, in her small way resembled the Duke of Wellington, she knew not generosity or magnanimity, those glorious attributes that adorn the conqueror far more than the gory wreath which encircles his brow.

Why? It would be hard to say, only, perhaps, because she dared to enter the lists against her; but Mabel took the most violent dislike against Miss Goodboye, and was so offensive when they met, with those satirical weapons which nature had endowed her, that Beatie, who had desired to sink past differences, showed fight in return, and would have suffered amputation rather than her foot should cross the doors wherein Mrs. Blake held sway.

Sybil could only grieve, but no longer in a

position to maintain her independence she no longer asserted it; nor could she bring herself to seek, where, hitherto, she had been sought, still less when unable to meet on equal terms.

One by one she found herself forced to give up her friends. How it came about she would have been puzzled to say, it seemed to glide in as a matter of course with her change of circumstances, and it was not till forced to forego her visit to D—— Park, accepted with so much pleasure and heartiness, that she became sensible how great was the pressure exercised over her.

Mabel was resolute that she should not have the pass, to which she was not included, and Sybil was forced to submit, conscious, at last, that certain similar disappointments were the result of design, not of accident, as she at the time imagined.

Those delightful rambles on horseback with her father became things of the past. Those happy days, when, free as the wind, she

dashed over moor and heather, outstripping her parent, to her great delight, and his surprise and mortification! They were gone! Mabel always rode with them now, and being a timid horsewoman the rides lost their fun and spirit.

Becoming delicate in health she (Mabel) was advised to lay aside her rides for a season. She could not exactly interdict her husband from riding, nor Sybil from accompanying him, but, fertile in expedient, she deputed her horse to her mother, as likewise her rôle of spy, hinting to her to keep an eye on Sybil, whom she suspected of some secret attachment, and was positive spoke against them to their friends!

Perhaps there was nothing that could have been more distasteful to both father and daughter than the addition of that flighty young lady, Mrs. Marshall, to their riding excursions. It was true she had no designs now upon Mr. Blake, save that of making herself agreeable to him as the master of

Ringwood, where it was her convenience and pleasure to take up her abode; and to this effect she enacted the frolicsome "Miss," up to all sorts of mischief.

She would inform Sybil she wanted dash, she had no mettle in her, and took upon herself the ungrateful task of infusing into her poverty-stricken mind a portion of those admirable feminine graces so conspicuous in herself, and found her pupil not responsive.

"I should be ashamed to call myself a horsewoman," said she on one occasion, "if I had not more pluck."

It was a curious fact with regard to Mrs. Marshall, that when she donn'd the riding-habit she doff'd much of her refinement.

Sybil accepted the rebuke in silence, not desiring to entertain the conversation.

Her riding mistress bit her lips, and considered her refractory pupil required training more ways than one; not exactly in the respect due to age—oh, no—for she herself did not look thirty, but in the respect due to superior skill in the noble art of horsemanship.

At the moment our two ladies were drawn up under a tree, and near a brook that impeded their further progress. They were waiting their squire, Mr. Blake, who had gone to reconnoitre positions, the groom keeping guard at a respectful distance.

As we said, Mrs. Marshall bit her lips ; she did more, she made symbolic signs with her whip of a desire to punish the wicked. One of these cuts at the air took effect on the ear of her horse, who revolted at the unjust treatment.

"My poor boy," exclaimed the tender-hearted parent, "did she then? Did she hurt her own Mazeppa? the darling! She didn't mean it. No, no; she wouldn't have done it for all the world. There, kiss it, and make it well. No, my pet, it was not meant for *you*. There, all gone; quite well now."

She was not pleased at Sybil's laughing.

"What a girl that is," thinks the preceptress; "not one particle of feeling and sentiment—it's throwing pearls to—pigs."

Mrs. Marshall was too elegant even to think "swine."

"Your papa is gone a long time," said she; "Mazeppa wants to be off like his mistress. If it was not for you I should not stay here so quietly."

"Papa wished us to do so," said Sybil.

"Yes—yes, I know," returns the fair equestrian, impatient of the curb; "I must not say anything. I was only saying if you would place yourself in my hands, before the month was out there would not be a thing in this country you could not take."

"The cathedral?"

"How silly you are; you get more childish than ever; you have no spirit or ambition in you."

"I have no ambition that way; a good ride I enjoy, and I can clear a ditch, and that is sufficient for me."

"But you have never tried."

"Tried the cathedral?" says Sybil, laughing; "I never mean to. 'Vaulting ambition o'erleaps itself.'"

"Vaulting stupidity! You mean that for

wit, I suppose; my dear, it's trash, and you ought to be ashamed of it."

"It's not mine, I am sorry to say; but Shakspeare's."

"I don't care whose it was, and as for that fellow Shakspeare, he ought to have been hanged long ago, as that great poet Lord Caerleon said."

"Did Lord Caerleon say that of Shakspeare?"

"He did not say him precisely, he was too noble to do so; but of course he meant him, and I say ditto. It's Shakspeare this, and Shakspeare that; really no one seems without his Shakspeare. What does the old fellow mean by living so long?"

"Shakspeare Redivivus, it seems," remarked Sybil. "I thought the original three hundred gone."

"Three hundred! What do they mean by making such a fuss about an old horror like that? He ought to have been put on the shelf ages ago."

"So he is on everybody's shelf."

"Where you will be, Miss Sybil, I can tell you. You are a great deal too learned for me. No good comes to a girl through her knowing too much. In my time if a young lady knew the Whole Duty of Man that was all she wanted, and" (angrily) "she never laughed but when she was told to."

"Pardon me, I thought she was expected to jump over everything in the country."

"Then you thought wrong. Your harping upon that so, I suspect, is intended as a reflection upon me for my failure of the five-bar the other day; but you should remember that I had been out of practice, and me and my pretty Mazeppa were strangers to each other."

"Is it long since you rode?"

"Not since Mabel was b—b—married."

"Born" was the word about to slip out, but as she did not look thirty, and was only thirty-eight, time and circumstances would not consort.

"Married to Mr. Forster?" says Sybil, with a quiet smile.

"Let me see, was it so long ago as that? Oh! what a rider I was; they used to say there was not such a girl in all the country."

"Did they?" asks Sybil, absently.

Her thoughts were far distant from Mrs. Marshall and her riding reminiscences, who however could never understand that her recollections were of no possible interest to any other but herself, the narrator thereof.

"Yes, did they," she answered smartly, "and said, too, they never saw any one sit a horse like me."

"So well, I suppose."

"So well, of course! I could keep pace with the stoutest, and never missed a race, nor a meet, nor a —"

"Steeple chase?" suggests Sybil.

"You wicked, wicked thing! If I haven't a very great mind to give you this! (Emblematic play with her whip.) No! no! my sweet (to Mazeppa). Not you, but her! She

wants it a great deal more! Stand still! Now, if you are a good boy, I will tell you a little secret! A great secret! But you must not tell it again. Do you hear? Ah! you may laugh."

This, we presume, was addressed to Sybil, though there are such things as horse laughs.

"You must not tell her on any account," Mrs. Marshall went on, "no, not for the world, or I will never forgive you—never, never, love you; never, never, never, ride you again!"

Mazeppa seemed to relish the idea, and testified it by sundry capers. Horse play, no doubt.

"There's a love!" returns his fair interpreter, "I thought we should understand one another."

"He must not tell the important secret," says Sybil, "to his friend Gulnare (the horse she was riding), or she may tell it again; ladies are not to be trusted."

"Do you hear that, poppet?" returns the playful Amazon, "mind you remember."

"Forget, you mean," interposed Sybil.

"Forget?"

"That's a certain way not to tell."

"True! Be sure you remember to forget. Hold up, boy! I want to whisper in your ear," which Mazeppa did not want. "Nobody must know but *you*," reining him up, and leaning forward, whispers to him, a stage whisper, and looking archly at Sybil—"You must know, my angel—Bad boy! No corn!—You must know—Quiet, sir!—You must know that—whoo!—that the fair—sh—sh! the fair—whip! whip! whip! the fair and dashing—Naughty! ugly!—Clementina—Horsey! Be quiet!—Clementina—donkey, I'll flog you!—Clementina—Horsey, Pig! wretch! brute! Will' you stand still? Clementina has—Whoo! No corn! no hay! Horsey has ridden—Hush! good boy! good dog!—horse, I mean!—Well, she has ridden—soon over, now—ridden in a—mustn't tell—a steeple chase! There, it's done! Tut! tut! Not a word! Do you see this?"—the whip.

"Mazeppa looks," said Sybil, greatly amused at the farce, "as if he would like to go at once, and publish your shocking confession to the whole country."

"If you dare," cried the amiable mistress, "see if I don't give you a good ducking in the brook here!"

Mrs. Marshall paused, and looking round, found a fresh subject.

"I wonder," said she, "what's to prevent our taking the brook? It's a mere ditch to many I have cleared."

"I should not like to try it," answered Sybil.

"Because you are a—baby."

Sybil made no reply.

Mrs. Marshall bit her lips again.

"You think I could not do it?"

"I think it would be a dangerous experiment."

"Do you dare me to it?"

"Me dare you, Mrs. Marshall?"

"What will you lay I can't do it?"

"I never laid a wager in my life. (To her father, as he rode up)—Betting is gambling, is it not, papa?"

"Two roads having the same termination," he answered laconically.

"Two roads!" cried Mrs. Marshall. "Where? I don't see them."

"We are not so fortunate," answered Robert, "as to have such a choice. The river looks ugly for ladies to ford, and the bridge is gone that used to be about here. So we must e'en go back from whence we came." And wheeling round he commenced singing, *à basse voix*—

"The bridge is broke, and you can't get o-ver,
Tol-de-rol-de-ri-do, Tol de rol de ri-do."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Marshall, "to go back all that way, just for this strip, that a baby could jump over."

"A rare baby-jumper that!" said Robert, laughing, "you must give him a pair of wings."

"Just see what a woman can do!" says

she superbly. "If I lead the way, you will not be afraid to follow, I suppose!" and she dashed off.

Mr. Blake and his daughter stood looking a moment in dumb surprise.

"She cannot be in earnest," said the former rousing, "it must be one of her jokes."

But as the lady Mazeppa continued to speed her course along the bank, he considered her to be in earnest, and sure enough they did follow their leader.

She looked back, and seeing them in pursuit, shook her whip in playful defiance. Espying a spot she deemed favourable for her purpose, she careered back, put her horse on his mettle, and rushed forward for the leap.

It would have been matchless, if successful.

But lo! fate forbade.

A bound, a plunge, a shriek, and a huge billow, scattering its bulk in all directions, half smothering her bewildered retinue, close upon her track, revealed the sad termination to this too daring exploit.

On their subsidence, the heroic lady was seen making circles in the waters, as she paddled her way in desperate strife adown the stream.

She did not look a water-lily, subject for a certain noble poet, whom she admired to celebrate; her pride, her mettle, her dash, had received the cold dash, and wildly imploring aid, the poor lady presented as piteous a spectacle as could well be pourtrayed.

She had been unhorsed, and the selfish Mazeppa, sufficiently human to argue that number one is the first law of nature, left his unfortunate rider to her fate, and scrambling out the best he could,—

“He stopped not for brake, he stopped not for stone,”

but took to his heels, and disdaining the circuitous routes, mapped out by wiser (?) heads, sped on *à vol d’oiseau*, as the French say, and reached *his* “home, sweet home,” long before his less fortunate brethren were permitted to say their souls were their own, and make for the same happy bourne.

Robert lost no time in rendering the aid his distressed mother-in-law so much required. He too took the water; they it should be, since it was the horse and his rider that entered therein, if with less dash, with less splash at all events.

It was not wholly unaccompanied with danger; the swollen water was deeper than it appeared, and the good steed must swim for it. Robert caught the forlorn Naiad by one of her supplicating hands; she grasped so hard he could scarce keep his balance, and giving his horse the initiative, he left him to find his way to the bank, and land them in safety.

Sybil was in waiting to assist; she had dismounted, and stood watching with anxious eyes the progress of this water party.

Clinging fast to an alder, she supported Mrs. Marshall till her father could extricate himself, and assist in the landing of the now helpless lady.

Her safety assured, the instinct of preser-

vation so desperate in its efforts, gave way to exhaustion, and she was dragged on to the bank in an insensible state.

She was more frightened than hurt, and on her recovery it was necessary to find something as a conveyance home; the man was despatched to the few cottages that made up a hamlet in the distance; it afforded nothing superior to a tax-cart, with which the messenger returned.

Ignominious as was this accommodation to the sentimental feelings of Mrs. Marshall, it was Hobson's choice—that or none; unless she preferred to take up her abode in one of those same humble retreats, till a vehicle could be forwarded to her from Ringwood.

Mrs. Marshall disliked poverty to the full as much as her daughter, but to be partaker thereof, be an object of charity; very likely mirth to clodhoppers! Perhaps she would have to give them something! and she had left her purse at home! she always did when she went out.

"Robert will pay for the cart," thought she, so she put her refinement in her pocket, and consented to the unaristocratic tax-cart.

Let no one say "I will not drink of this water."

She had yet to humble her pride a little further.

If she had left her purse at home, she had not forgotten to bring her pocket-companion, a mirror, which at a convenient moment, while her friends were busily arranging for her comfort in the cart, she drew out to ascertain the amount of damage done to her beauty.

It was too humiliating.

Her roses had been all washed away, her front hair was matted to her head, her back hair, those massy braids that looked so beautiful under her hat, where were they?

Alack! In the river, making good their escape, extended full length, they were bounding along like small sea-serpents at play.

That elegant article, her hat, followed suit,

and was indulging in a pleasant sail, dancing through all the eddies, and may be doing so still, for aught we know to the contrary.

Mrs. Marshall could not go home that figure! Suppose, by any accident, a certain noble poet should see her! she could never survive the disgrace.

She felt a chill, she had better go to the cottages, and have her things dried before starting for home.

To the despised cottages they wended their way, and the charitable inmates rendered all the assistance in their power.

It was a long business, and Robert had his pockets full of patience, but his considerate mamma-in-law would not hear of his and Sybil's going home, and sending the carriage for her.

It would be the dark hours, and she was afraid of banditti. They were dreadful in foreign countries.

But when the time of departure arrived there was another fix.

"What on earth was she to do for a bonnet?"

She flouted the offer of benevolent handkerchiefs, but despoiled of more than half her charms, was it possible for her to ride eight miles in a tax cart, without anything on her head?

No sooner was her want made known, than the cottagers turned out, and there appeared on the scene a display of millinery, that, in style, must have belonged to the year one, and have done duty ever since.

Mrs. Marshall was fearfully particular about her bonnets. The milliners dreaded to see her enter their shops.

She nearly swooned away at the sight of the horrors, and she was longer deciding which it should be, than a girl with half-a-dozen eligible offers at command.

Sorely tried, she took Sybil's advice as to cleanliness, and bought—Robert paid for it—she having left her purse at home. She was to pay him again, but she didn't.

She, however, chose one of those elegant

head dresses, properly the national head-dress of the English peasant women—a cotton sun-bonnet.

It was about as becoming to Mrs. Marshall as to the rest of her countrywomen. The man-servant, on the return of the cavalcade to Ringwood, informed his friends as how, "the old Marshall looked the most 'ageous guy as ever he see on a Fox's day."

"Sarve her right," says Mrs. Butcher, tenderly sympathetic; "she won't be a-goin' jinketink about in them hop-o-my-thumb ways agin in a hurry, just for all the world as if she was ' Miss,' or a young think o' sixteen."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THROUGH THE WOOD TO THE MEADOWS.

F. R. Lee.—1870.

As that sensible lady Mrs. Butcher said, Mrs. Marshall's "jinketink about in them hop-o-my-thumb ways," was over for the present.

Her feat of the brook ended in a feat of the rheumatism, which rendered her invisible to her friends, till such time as those charms that the remorseless waters had stolen from her should be replaced, and she be once more the mirror of fashion to admiring Ringwood.

The accident had one good effect.

It enabled Mrs. Blake to put a veto on her husband riding ; she was fearful he might follow the example set him, and he, willing to indulge her, promised obedience with reservations.

But Mabel was fain to acknowledge that to scheme and contrive was useless.

What will be, will be, in spite of all the arts arrayed against it, and it certainly was not given to her to weave the destinies of either Sybil or Mr. Bertram, nor yet of Mr. Church.

She might now and then succeed in preventing a meeting, or in causing a disappointment, but it often recoiled on herself, and she was oftener defeated than successful.

If she fancied herself sincere in the proposition of Mr. Bertram as a husband for her step-daughter, rather than his rival, she was mistaken, but her genuineness in most things is to be doubted, and she could not in truth believe that a girl like Sybil was not good

enough for Mr. Bertram, though her future might differ materially from what it had promised, she who would have adorned a throne.

Yet this was the reason she gave to her mother, for not encouraging the visits of that gentleman, as if any excuse was necessary to her who disliked Sybil even more than she did, and proves how odious artifice is, that even to a confederate we make pretence of justifying the most unjustifiable proceedings.

"Mr. Bertram marry Sybil, mamma?" cries Mabel scornfully; "why should he do so? what possible reason can he have for it? a girl without a sixpence of her own! Why, mamma dear! she cannot put in such claims to the four requisites of Lord Caerleon as yourself. No one could say you were not handsome—when you were young, and you do look young,—younger than you are."

At the mention of my Lord's name, Mrs. Marshall smiled bewitchingly, still more so at the praise of her beauty—it clouded (her

smile) when its period was assigned, revived at the elixir youth, and evaporated when qualified by a tincture of truth.

The unfortunate lady was laid up with what Mrs. Butcher termed the "romantics," a malady which her historians are forced to admit she had been afflicted with all her life.

"Beauty, when unadorned, adorned the most," was an idyll not to be applied to Mrs. Marshall at the present time of day, too ill to *illuminate*, and divested of those adjuncts which dress impose, she looked what she was, a sorry figure, and nothing less, and her affectionate daughter, though she was not cracked, and could tell a *story* naturally, yet felt it impossible to go to the length of saying she was young and beautiful.

"Pray, Mabel, speak lower, it jars my nerves. I don't see but what Sybil and Mr. Bertram would make an excellent match."

Mrs. Marshall felt she had her daughter there.

"An excellent one for her no doubt, and all

I can say is I wish she may get him, but there is not the least probability of such a thing, Sybil is becoming *passé*."

"She looks thirty, as old as I do," says Mrs. Marshall.

The corners of Mabel's mouth twitched.

"She is going on for it really, and is not suitable for Mr. Bertram. Lady Clara would do charmingly for him, and really they were going on more like lovers, in the winter. They may be engaged, there is no one to control her, and I should say she was a young lady who would choose for herself, and stand by it."

"But surely she would look higher than him."

"I don't know that, mamma ! There is not now that distinction of class as formerly, the great levelling principle has extended itself to the upper ten thousand, and I do not believe that Lady Clara would consider she has stepped out of her rank, in marrying Mr. Bertram, though he has not a title, and I am

positive he would not, for they are proud enough in all conscience, and if date counts, they can set their claims beyond the Severns. No ! No ! Miss Sybil, you deceive yourself, if you think you are reserved for him ; you will know your place better presently."

It was very good of Mrs. Blake to undertake the management of Mr. Bertram's affairs, and that particular one too, in which gentlemen are supposed to be least desirous of interference.

We know not if he was sensible of the gratitude he owed to this lady ; he did not shew it, but came very often, both with and without his sister.

Sybil would have rejoiced to have this young lady for her friend, but they were too far apart for great intimacy, even if delicacy on the brother's account had not interfered to prevent it.

It was not assuredly any diplomacy exercised by Mrs. Blake at this period that was the cause of Mr. Bertram's hesitation, or Mr.

Church's reticence;—for Love is a despot, owning no will but his own, nor brooks of interference.

Sybil's unresponsiveness might be ascribed as one cause why neither of these gentlemen proposed to her at this time, did we not all know how far the best supported theories differ from the real fact, and even in this small point under consideration, not one of the four personages most interested was influenced by the motives set down for them.

Our heroine could hardly have defined her feelings; she was not conscious of a preference towards either of her admirers. She did not dislike Mr. Church by any means, and was sometimes inclined to think that the greater *empressement* which he certainly displayed was a stronger proof of attachment than the "hesitation" that had first recommended his rival.

Mr. Bertram, however, had so many amiable qualities, and this same hesitation might belong to the difference of character, but still there

may be too much of a good thing, and hesitation carried beyond its proper limits may be construed into lukewarmness, anything but a recommendation in a lover.

Mabel was for ever asserting that he and the Lady Clara Beverley were engaged. Sybil did not agree with her; surely he would not come so often to the house of an unmarried girl, was he bound to another.

But was it so, she could not feel pain.

She was pleased to have these kind people, the Bertrams, for her friends; they were scarce now, even Rosalind Smythe seemed changed since the evening of the dinner-party at the Hall; but as yet no stronger feeling than friendship existed, and had either of the young men offered himself at this time, most certainly she would not have accepted him.

She was too high-minded to give her hand without the entire bestowal of her affections. They were not as yet free from old-absorbing memories sufficiently to permit her to indulge in a newer sentiment; besides, there was

something looming very near, she did not look askance at it, she rather hailed it as a decision which would certify her real position, and leave her to shape her course in the future.

Sybil, therefore, gave no encouragement to either of her lovers, indeed, a singular apathy had taken possession of the girl, or if a sudden response for regard that stood the test of change moved her to momentary exultation, it was but as the light wind playing over the surface of the stream, leaving its under-current to flow on in peaceful obscurity.

END OF PART III.

PART IV.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

“THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS.”

It was on the day that Sybil completed her twenty-first year, that the circumstance took place which was henceforth to determine her fortunes.

Mrs. Blake gave birth to a son.

The delight of the happy father was tempered.

He feared it would prove painful to his beloved daughter, dearer if possible than ever to him.

He did not know her yet; she had sank

herself, and so prepared herself, that it brought neither mortification nor regret.

It was rather a relief and a satisfaction, that however unwittingly, she had not been the cause of disappointment to another, so dear to her, that she might have regarded it as a misfortune.

She accepted the little stranger in all good faith, and took to it with sisterly affection, and Mabel, who had destined this as the bitterest potion she could administer, saw her drink of it with perfect impunity.

The first real difference that may be said to have taken place between Mr. and Mrs. Blake was on this very subject of union and amity, this new tie, bringing with it so much love and happiness, yet so many new cares, and wants, and anxieties.

Little recked he, the new-comer, of it all, lying there in his infant beauty, the halo of love and peace still shining round him.

Is there aught on this earth of ours a thing

so beautiful as a little child? or so wondrous, as the gradual development of his faculties, into the sentient, intelligent, and intellectual being that constitutes the perfect man?

Children are the gift of God.

Fresh from His hand, quickened by His breath, stainless and new! To you, parents, and ye to whom the charge of helpless infancy is entrusted—to you it is given to mould the formless mind, wake into life its latent faculties, give it colour and direction, and make it meet for the destiny His inscrutable wisdom may have assigned to it.

Parents and guardians! betray not the solemn trust committed to your charge, as ye would answer for it at the judgment.

“Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs from thistles?”

How can ye expect your children to grow up good and virtuous, if ye yourselves set them not the example of an orderly and well-regulated life? If the hallowed fane of home

be desecrated by broil and strife? If ye command not your own passions, nor curb the license of the tongue?

We do not speak here of violence and crime, engendered of poverty, and suffering, and ignorance.

There is yet a deeper stain, that comes not wholly out of the depths of woe and misery such as this.

We speak of infanticide, that scarlet letter of the nineteenth century, as hypocrisy, that serpent-deceiver is another, testimonies to the advance of civilization.

We, worshippers at the shrine of the purest, the most merciful, the most exalted of all religions, we shrink with horror at the oft-told tale of the "Massacre of the Innocents," or turn with bedewed eyes from its representation.

We raise our hands in affright, and pass sentence on the benighted Hindoo and Chinese for the slaughter of their innocents.

With pious zeal we send forth the missionary to supplant a cruel and mistaken creed.

“What says Christ the Lawgiver?

“Thou hypocrite! First cast out the beam out of thine own eye.”

Let us be hypocrites no longer!

Rather let us clothe ourselves in sackcloth, and with bowed heads, cry, “Woe unto us of this Christian land, that such deeds of darkness should be done! Deeds, before which, in atrocity, the twin crimes of Pharaoh and Herod grow pale and dim.”

What says Christ the Father?

“Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

Words “writ with an iron pen, and graven on the rock for ever.”

Oh! that they would but speak to the passions, as they do to the hearts of men! That they would but teach them tenderness and forbearance towards “the little

children," the lambs of His flock, who are to come after themselves—teach them to restrain the "noisy breath," withhold the heavy hand, and nurture their little ones in love, and truth, and gentleness—teach men to redress the grievous wrongs and cruelties inflicted on the new-born and helpless of our day. Let them seek the remedy, and stay the murderous hand raised against the lives of these innocent and defenceless creatures, whom God has endowed with immortal souls, and sins against whom,—In His sight, no greater can be perpetrated.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

STEPPE I.

MRS. BLAKE, as may be supposed, was not a little proud of her new acquisition, in the shape of her little son, and desired to signalize his consequence by an imposing ceremonial of a christening.

Mr. Blake was not less proud and pleased with his boy than herself, but could not see the necessity of making his christening a subject for particular demonstration; it could not make him dearer in one sense, though it might in another.

It was not this which influenced the father, but he thought it incompatible with their position and circumstances, with respect to "Ringwood," and preferred it should be a quiet ceremony, without parade or ostentation, his friend the vicar and himself godfathers, and Sybil godmother.

"Do you call that a christening?" remonstrated his wife, "It would shame a pauper; and my boy, the heir of Ringwood; but anything is good enough for him."

"Nothing is good enough you mean! He is the prince of babies," and as he spoke, the father's eyes rested with delight on his son, peacefully sleeping on the lap of his mother.

"I hate the Smythes," says the amiable lady.

"I am sorry for it, Mabel! They are friends of mine."

"That's one penalty I have paid," said she, "sitting every Sunday in that antedeluvian church."

"I did not know they had christian churches before the flood."

"I suppose they had an ark of some kind, and this was the original; and as for Mr. Smythe, I would as soon hear—

"It's a pity you ever left St. John's, if such are your sentiments," and he spoke gravely.

"I should have thought you would have felt more pride in your son, considering he is the first you have had."

Robert opened his eyes.

"He is your second son, and my third," he answered quietly.

"Your third son? I never knew you had one before."

He did not say what he felt—that her interest in him had not been sufficient that she cared to know aught about his children.

Mabel's next words were as though she read his thoughts.

"I knew there were five children, but was told they were girls."

"Thought" would have been nearer the truth.

He made no answer.

"Ah! that is why mine is not so precious. You hate him because he has cut out Sybil."

A flush spread over Robert's face.

"What cause have you to say so, Mabel?"

"You would not be so unkind to him, and to me, otherwise."

"Unkind?"

"Yes. About the christening."

"Do not make false accusations, Mabel, and be more certain of your words before you utter them. I do object, in our little man's case, to a parade of his pretensions, standing as we do in regard to this place."

"Reginald would not have thought so. No godfather would have been good enough for *his* son; we had arranged it all,—only he died."

"You give a bad precedent," said her husband. "Your first child would have stood in a very different position had he lived. And moreover, how useless was all your foresight! How did it all end?"

"How cruel of you to remind me of it!"

"Is the remembrance still so painful? Cannot this little cherub console you? though I, it seems, have failed," and there was reproach in his tone.

"A mother never forgets her first-born."

"Very natural, but your first never lived."

"You do not care much for me, if you do not know better than that."

Robert smiled at the retaliation on his own unexpressed thoughts.

"Was he born alive then?"

"To be sure he was."

"How long did he live?"

"More than half-an-hour. They sent for Mr. Smythe to baptize him—but—"

"Say no more, my dear! You hold him again in your arms. This one shall make it up to you; and if it really is a thing of such moment, I promise you shall have a god-father for the little one more important than Mr. Smythe and myself put together. I will ask my friend, Lord D—, to do us the honour. I know he will not refuse."

"How good of you," returns his wife, quite consoled. "That will be charming. My son to have a nobleman for his godfather!"

"A nobleman he is without his title, and what I trust his godson will be, if Lord D—— will take upon him the office. But let me advise you, my dear, not to instil into our boy's mind false notions of his importance; he is not born in the purple, and must fight his way through the world."

"I cannot see the necessity."

"What is to become of those who come after him? I need not repeat that with him Ringwood passes from the family that ought never to have possessed it."

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," answers Mrs. Blake, who could quote Scripture as well as anyone when it suited her purpose. "If you would only take my advice, Ringwood might double its rental, and return between this and then, ample to leave the successors you are so provident for, all in affluence."

"Indeed?" said Robert, smiling.

"Yes, indeed," returns his wife.

"How is that, my dear?"

"You cannot but confess that the farms are shamefully under rented."

"I do not think so. But if they were, better so than over; and, good or bad the season, payment has never failed."

"And there is that bailiff of yours—steward he calls himself now. He is feathering his nest at your expense finely. By-and-bye, if you keep him much longer, he would be able to buy Ringwood, if you were to sell it."

"Sell Ringwood? I could not touch a rood of it."

"I know that. But you might put a stop to some of his larcenies, by taking some of the land to build on. There are excellent sites lying off on the lower road."

"And who's to build them?"

"Let it on building leases."

"I doubt the power of doing so."

"Then build them yourself, for the benefit of your son."

"My dear, you are not such a manager as I thought you. Build on another man's land, and with an expiring lease? That would never do. I give you leave to put me in a lunatic asylum when I do that."

Mrs. Blake was not convinced. But feeling powerless with a husband so blind and intractable, that though Fortune knocked at his door, he would not be persuaded to open to her, she consoled herself with the reflection that Ringwood belonged to her son in the future, which would take care of itself no doubt, while the christening took precedence as a thing of the present.

She would have much desired that the Lord Severn, their neighbour, should be coadjutor with Lord D——; but on this Robert put a decided negative as too preposterous.

Mrs. Marshall ventured a word in favour of her *protégé*, Lord Casrleon.

"The boy would turn out a poet, mark my words!" said she.

"Byron—re-redivivus, with another four requisites," said Robert, smiling. "I am afraid there is no room in my den for a lion, with five hundred volumes to back him. Lord D—— and myself are bail sufficient, I hope, for our lad's good behaviour, who will scribble his share of nonsense, I daresay, though not born a poet."

"But, still, you might just write and ask him ; it would be paying him a compliment."

"But I have no wish to pay compliments to Lord Caerleon. I do not know him ; I never saw him but once, and then hardly spoke to him."

"That's a pity, for he grows upon you ; he is too sweet to refuse."

"You, anything, no doubt," said Robert, smiling. "But you are a fair lady ; I, on the contrary, am afraid of a rebuff."

"'Nothing venture, nothing have.' He would do it for my sake, I know."

"You are better acquainted with him, Mrs.

Marshall ; but for myself, if he asked me, I will not say I would refuse, but most certainly I would rather not have him godfather to my boy."

"That's cruel to say so of my friends."

"Is Lord Caerleon a friend of yours? I beg pardon ! (slily). Why don't you write and ask him ?"

"As if I would do such a thing ! And my dear Lord so hated !"

"'Barkis is willing, and gives his consent,' " said he, wickedly, and the matter dropped.

Mrs. Blake did not at all approve of Sybil as godmother, but could not disclose her sentiments to her husband, nor yet to her step-daughter, who had readily acceded to the proposal.

Truth to say, she looked upon it with contempt. But she was not on terms of intimacy with any lady of rank sufficient to make such a request, and Robert maintaining his ground as to Sybil, she yielded with a bad grace, for "she could not consider Sybil properly

qualified for the solemn trust of the child's eternal welfare."

"I had set my heart on your being god-mother," said she to Adela, who had come down to Ringwood to render assistance.

Mrs. Davenport must have been better qualified to all intents and purposes, and then living so far off as she did from her youthful nephew, with her hands always full, and every moment of time occupied, were so many additional recommendations! but she and Sybil having taken a great liking to each other, they agreed to share the responsibility between them, and Mabel was, or was not, more satisfied.

Although she might congratulate herself on the sensation her son's christening created in the quiet of rural Ringwood, it was not by the better portion of its people by any means commended.

"How did the grand christening go off?" was a question put by one of a group of ladies and gentlemen, wending their way

home from church the following Sunday, in company as far as their roads tended in the same direction.

"Very well," answered the lady of the church—Mrs. Smythe. "He's a fine child for two months."

"With famous lungs," says Mrs. Goodboye, "and he took good care to let us know it."

"Never mind, he's a good little fellow," returns the mother of ten children. "He was quiet the moment the vicar (her husband) gave him back to Sybil; I believe he knows her already."

"It's shameful!" exclaims Beatrice Goodboye. "Of course I was not invited to the christening, but I went into the church to see Sybil, and I declare I could hardly keep quiet when I saw her holding the little monkey that has cut her out of everything."

"It is not the child's fault, my dear," remonstrates Mrs. Smythe.

"Oh! I know well enough whose fault it is, and she ought to be ashamed of herself,

and Sybil carries her virtue too far to submit to such indignity."

"I don't think Sybil cares anything about it," says Rosalind; "she is so unselfish."

"That's true," answered Mrs. Goodboye. "But I do think Mrs. Blake might shew a little more feeling towards the girl, who has had to give up all. It's cruel and indelicate."

"Just like her, mamma. I'll be bound it was all done to humble her."

"I cannot think Mrs. Blake would be so wicked," remarked Mrs. Smythe. "Charity teaches us to think better of one another."

And here she parted from her friends, and took her way to the vicarage, surrounded by her youthful progeny.

"Charity does," says Mrs. Armstrong, laughing. "Twenty guineas will buy a great deal of charity of that sort."

"Was that what the Vicar received?" asked Mrs. Goodboye.

"Mr. Blake sent him twenty guineas for making a Christian of his little heathen."

"It was very acceptable, you may be sure," replies another.

"And Mrs. Blake will never want for good words in that quarter," and Mrs. Armstrong gave a saucy laugh. "But you know nothing can be more absurd than such parade and ostentation, for after all, the place is not their own, and they really have no right to be there."

This is but one of the several comments made by "affectionate friends," who had been partakers of the festivity in honour of the occasion, and which comments were distinguished by more or less of severity towards Mrs. Blake, as the propounder of the display, as she assuredly was.

CHAPTER XL.

"Sabrina fair,
Listen where thou art sitting
Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave,
In twisted braids of lilies knitting."

SYBIL had no cause to complain of any change in the bearing of her friends towards her at this deposition of her as heiress, and on this same day of the christening, it seemed the aim of every one to impress on her that she was just the same dear and lovable girl to them as ever, and she, with the responsiveness of her nature, accepted it, and moved among them with all her own winning grace, her eyes perhaps a little more humid, her

manner perhaps a little more vivacious than usual.

Neither Mr. Church nor Mr. Bertram were present at the christening, but they came later to the fête given in celebration—properly a garden party—which ended with a sumptuous collation, a dance, and fireworks, outdoing the usual elegant quietude and simplicity understood by the term generally.

Sybil was able to judge for herself here of the truth of the remark made by most persons who knew him, "How ill Mr. Bertram was looking."

Still, he gave no symptom of it in his manner, but was the same quiet, self-possessed man, whom all regarded and esteemed. If there was a difference this evening, it was in being more demonstrative towards Sybil. He danced with her, and her only. It was behind her chair he stationed himself during the repast, and it was his arm that conveyed her to the scene of the fireworks, and her step-mother, all eyes, let nothing escape her, and

said to herself, "If it is to be, it is to be, I suppose, and it is useless to resist Fate."

Though Mr. Church did not entirely give way to his rival, he was yet less *exigant* than he had hitherto shown himself. If he was jealous, he took his own way of showing it, and stood looking on at the dance, watching with disdainful eyes the game his principles would not permit him to take part in.

Mrs. Blake watched him stealthily. Presently she went up to him, and in soft tones said—

"I fear, Mr. Church, you do not approve of our proceedings."

"I do not set myself up, Mrs. Blake, as the arbiter of your actions; they are not within my jurisdiction," was his answer.

Tears filled those cisterns, her eyes.

"You have not seen my little boy yet; I should so like to show him to you, but he is off for the night."

He made no reply.

"He loves me still," thought she.

"You like music, I know," said she, changing the subject. "I would ask my daughter to favour us, but she seems more pleasantly occupied; like all girls, she prefers dancing to music."

"She dances so well," he returned; "she excels in both."

"Perhaps I ought to say," answered her wily companion, "that she likes both best."

"Miss Blake likes that best which confers most pleasure on others, being as considerate as she is self-sacrificing," and he spoke with marked emphasis and precision.

A flush of mortified pride and jealousy passed over Mabel's face—for an instant only, for her voice was singularly modulated, as she said diffidently—

"Will it be too much, if I ask you to give me an ice?"

"Certainly not," and he moved to depart.

"Perhaps it were wiser that I go myself for it. You would find it difficult to make your way back, among these 'hop-o'-my-

thumbs,' as my old cook calls people who love locomotion," and she took his proffered arm.

"There!" she cried, as they passed through the waltzers, "fortunate I am not an ice! good-bye to me, else! I will not say dancing is a carpet knight, but a knock-you-down affair."

In this way she chatted to him as they went to the ante-room, where eke were spread the refreshments.

There were few in the room, and none she desired to converse with, so with a seeming oblivious air, she moved to the window, open, and leading on to the verandah, and Mr. Church proceeded to execute his commission.

"How lovely and fresh," said she, as he gave the ice into her hand. "Thanks!" and she glanced round, as if for a chair.

There were none, save in the verandah, and Mr. Church stepped out for the purpose of bringing one in, but she followed him.

"It is pleasant here," she said; "this *al*

fresco reminds me of days past and gone—gone for ever!” And she heaved a deep sigh. “Can you, Mr. Church,” she continued, “can you, who have studied deeply, account for the intense desire to live? that clinging to life through agony and suffering. There was a time when crushed to earth by a succession of calamities, that nearly overwhelmed me, with nothing more it seemed to desire to live for, yet I could not wish to die. Since, I have often lamented I did not then. How much unhappiness I should have been spared, and how many sins I should have been saved committing against others.”

“The great desire to live that you speak of,” he answered, sententiously, “was simply because your span was not measured, and the powers of life were in their full vigour. When they fail we yield to necessity, as in all other cases, and no longer strive against inexorable destiny. With respect to—”

He paused.

“Do go on,” said she, tremulously.

"This is neither the time or place befitting a sermon."

"Oh! do not say so. It is something to live for, if only to hear again the words of religion and truth."

And her voice sank.

"Will you not be seated?" said she presently.

He bowed, but remained standing.

"I hope you will finish what you were about to say," said she, persuasively.

"I would merely remark that perhaps you exaggerate the extent of your sins, as you call them; they may not have had the evil results your remorse may lead you to imagine."

"I do feel remorse, Mr. Church; bitter, undying remorse, which increases as time goes on, and" (dropping her voice) "will, I firmly believe, bring me to my grave."

Mr. Church looked out into the night, silent and immovable.

"There are the fireworks," said Mabel, rallying. "Might I ask you to give me a

wrapper? It is on the sofa in the library. Stay, I will get it myself. I suppose I must attend the vain and empty display; it is against my wish, but Robert and Sybil were too many for me."

She stepped in; the door into the library was close by. Mr. Church waited but an instant, for she was out again like lightning; she gave her cloak into his hands, he put it on her, and again she took his arm, and by the light of a torch they threaded the mazes of the flower garden on to the conservatory, which had been appointed as the "grand stand" for the sight-seers.

The glass front had been removed, the frame for the flowers had been converted into seats, cushioned and covered, and a Chinese lantern or two among the creepers that trellised the lofty roof shed a soft light within.

More fun and amusement was created by the wit of the gentlemen at the substitution of the ladies for the floral and legitimate occupants of the place than perhaps the exhibi-

tion itself, which was short and sweet, and afforded more entertainment, as was intended by Mr. Blake, for his poorer neighbours.

The terrors of the fair lest the frail amphitheatre should bring them all to grief, caused an excess of care and gallantry on the part of the gentlemen.

Our Sybil, seated at the end of one of the upper tiers, rained down a perfect shower of rockets from her bright eyes.

A group of adorers stood by her vieing with each other to do her homage, and longing for some Undine adventure by which to prove himself her liege knight.

Had she forgotten former days?

Certainly not; but at this moment the remembrance of them was in abeyance.

Had she forsaken Mr. Church?

She had never really thought seriously of him, and if he did cross her mind just now it was more with a feeling of relief that he was not near to cast his cold shadow over her renovated spirits. She was free and unfettered,

and it might be this glorious sensation that gave so much sparkle and elasticity to her conversation.

Mrs. Blake sat on one of the lower tiers, seemingly cold and abstracted as her cavalier who stood near her. She thought he was interested in the study of her, and in return she cast her eyes from time to time towards her step-daughter, believing that his would follow, and see for himself how light and frivolous she was, how utterly unsuited to be a clergyman's wife, and the duties expected of her.

He was wide awake, and the subdued light that just made "darkness visible" revealed to him more than he cared to see in the lady of his love, and the gentlemen who formed the body-guard of her admirers,—whom, however, with one exception, he believed he had nothing to fear from, their homage being the popular one paid to the shrine of beauty.

As usual at pyrotechnic displays on a small scale, the rockets were the chief attraction,

and the only thing that drew the attention of the laughter-loving young people from themselves and their soft nonsense.

For Nature will not always be repressed, and, under certain influences, will throw off the mask of form and rule, and dare to assert her right to be natural.

It was a moment when all heads were bent to take in the drop of the resolving stars, that a rocket, mis-directed, sent its shaft crashing through the glass dome that formed the roof, beneath which were arranged the living flowers, all in full bloom, safe and secure as was supposed.

A simultaneous shriek, and a regular scramble from the tiers behind to the front, succeeded, there sat the elder portion of the company, whose escape, however, was easy into the open air. To add to the confusion, one of the bars of the stand snapped from undue pressure, and a panic, half real, half assumed, was the consequence. No one was injured, or even hurt, but what was self-

inflicted ; yet, had they all been going to perdition, they could not have made more of it, or cried louder for help.

There were not wanting the Hildebrandts, or the Sir Galahads, for the rescue ; Sybil had hers—she sat, as we said, at the end, and on the one that broke. She uttered no cry, though in the *mêlée* she could scarce save herself from being flung off. Mr. Bertram guarded her like a dragon.

“Spring !” said he, excitedly, as she rose, or rather tried to rise, and he held up his arm to catch her.

She reached out her two dear hands to put into his, meaning to try for a jump.

“Allow me to lift you down,” says Mr. Church, the taller man of the two.

And before she could remonstrate, or, indeed, understood him, he had lifted her lightly and tenderly to the ground.

“The lady was my care, Mr. Church !” said Mr. Bertram, with spirit.

“I know it,” returned his adversary, apolo-

getically ; “ but you did not see her danger. Look !” and he pointed to the stand, which, tilting forwards, seemed nodding to its fall—like ladies of the Grecian bend of present fashion.

“ There was no danger !” said Sybil, with flashing eyes.

Mr. Church saw she was angry, and turned away to render assistance to some less ungrateful fair. He had spoiled the pleasantest day Sybil had passed since her return to England. She was not a prude ; on the contrary, she was as sympathetic as a good and virtuous girl could be. But Mr. Church she did not look on as a lover—nor was yet so indifferent to her that she could look on his offence as one dictated solely by chivalry towards the sex—and she felt a greater resentment towards him, than she would have believed it possible a few minutes before to feel against anyone.

“ How dare he touch me !” was her inward ejaculation, indignant pride crimsoning her cheek and brow. “ What have I ever ac-

corded to him that he should take such a freedom?"

She felt hardly the same during the short half-hour that remained, ere the guests departed. Her cheerfulness and self-possession were gone, though she acquitted herself of her small part with the same sweet and lovable grace.

Mr. Bertram was as discomposed as man could be, but he remained at her side—one among the merry group that returned to the house—laughing at their recent fright, and recounting their disasters and escapes. He had this day delivered himself up to the fascinations of his idol, nor left her till he had deposited her, radiant and beaming under his influence, within the fostering care of the paternal walls. Even then he appeared loth to depart, and his sister must remind him ever and anon that the hour was late, and their way long.

He bade adieu at last with a pressure of her hand, and his last look reminded her of

one other, and recalling that other to her remembrance, she shivered, doubting herself for the first time.

“You have solved a riddle—a riddle for me, my dear Miss Sybil,” says that gem of ladies, Mrs. Worth, speaking in a low voice, and looking very arch. “I have discovered the cause of my friend, Mr. Bertram’s, changed looks, and appoint you his physician.”

Sybil shook her head for answer; but the colour came into her cheeks and the tears into her eyes, and she kissed that kind and amiable lady, who read in the gentle embrace that a cross lay hid on the breast of the beautiful and innocent girl.

CHAPTER XLI.

CHESS.—QUEEN RETREATS.

THOUGH the bold Baron of the Lion-heart, into which my Lord Caerleon had construed the philology of his name, did not attend the christening of the Ringwood baby, nor yet become one of the sponsors, it was not because he was altogether ignorant of the fact of the launch of that frail little bark of humanity on to the stormy sea of life, and the baptism connected therewith.

Mr. Blake spoke jestingly, and to silence Mrs. Marshall, when in answer to her petition in favour of her friend, Lord Caerleon, as

sponsor, he unwittingly proposed she should make the request.

He had as little idea she would take him at his word, as had the Lord of Coventry, when he dared his wife, the Lady Godiva, to the fulfilment of certain conditions, ere he yielded to her importunities. He never dreamed she would accept the challenge, and carry the day against him.

Married ladies and widows have privileges accorded to them, on the strength of their superior importance derived from the name of their lords and masters, which privileges it were hopeless for the single to strive for, seeing they want that one armorial bearing to enhance their merit, and failing it, must stand back and take their rank among the nobodies.

Mrs. Marshall did what few married or single ladies would be found to do, despite the privileges of the former, and especially on so short a notice as her slight acquaintance with the poet lord may be termed.

She wrote a letter to him.

It was this wise—

"MY DEAR LORD CAERLEON,—

"I should not have been so presumptuous as to address your lordship, had I not been appointed by Mr. Blake, of 'Ringwood,' as his ambassadress, to solicit your lordship's most distinguished co-operation with Lord D——, as sponsor to his infant son and heir. The ceremony will take place on the 4th of next month, and should your lordship deign to honour the ancient House of Ringwood with so flattering a proof of your esteem and approbation, it will receive a lustre which it never before possessed, and be one among those many acts of condescension which have marked the public and private career of your lordship, and made your lordship's great name a bulwark of England's liberties. I trust your lordship will believe that it was only after long and doubtful hesitation I consented to accept so delicate an office as this proposal, feeling myself, as I do, unworthy of so great an honour. But it was urged upon me as being one whom it pleased

your lordship to single out with marked courtesy recently, even to the promise of one of those undying volumes of 'Byron Redivivus,' which has placed your lordship as the first of England's poets.

"I grieve much to have to inform your lordship that the precious gift has not yet been received by me, and much fear some accident may have befallen it on its way. It may have been stolen, and the unhappiness is mine of feeling that I may be suspected of ingratitude, a crime I should blush to be guilty of towards your lordship, whose name I hold in the highest reverence, and should consider the gift of such rare poetry, the produce of immortal mind, as the most remarkable epoch of my life.

"Mr. Blake unites with me in respectful regards to your lordship, and awaiting your reply, believe me,

"My dear Lord Caerlon,

"Your obedient, humble servant,


"CLEMENTINA MARSHALL."

The fair Clementina despatched this to his Lordship's seat, in Monmouthshire, and waited with tender anxiety the answer to her interesting effusion, elaborated with so much care and study, and revised and reviewed, and altered and re-written so much and so oft, that it became rather late in the day for such an occasion, when finally despatched.

Mrs. Marshall, for some days previous to the christening, was in a state of excessive trepidation; she counted the days, waylaid the post, but no answer came.

Her disappointment knew no bounds, and she was doomed to bear it alone. She knew her son-in-law too well to doubt of his entire disapproval, were he made acquainted with the application. It would all come right, was Lord Caerleon's answer favourable; but if not, she must keep it to herself, and her futile attempts to bring about an acquaintance would be known only to herself.

And so it was, and Mrs. Marshall looked both forlorn and rueful on her little grand-



son's crowning-day. There were no *beaux* for her, and she was regarded in the mortifying light of the grandmamma, and no mistake.

She quarrelled with the little delinquent for being a boy, and told him he ought to be ashamed of himself! If he had been a girl, he would not have cut out his sweet pretty sister, who must hate him for it.

The youthful sinner smiled, we must not affirm, at the reprimand of his affectionate grandmamma, who begun early to point out to him the errors of his ways, but his sister smiled, and speaking for him, said—

“They must be very wicked who could hate innocent babies; she loved her dear little brother with all her heart, and was certain he knew her already.”

Upon which Mrs. Marshall turned the vials of her wrath upon the devoted head of this second delinquent, and asked her—

“How she could suppose she would believe such a story as that; she loved a *thing* that had cut her out, of what had hitherto been

her expected inheritance, and made a beggar of her?"

"How could the dear baby help it?" said Sybil, with spirit. "I may equally have cut out someone else, whose expectations were just as good as mine."

"And would you believe them, if they said they loved you the better for it? They would be hypocrites."

"I am sorry, Mrs. Marshall, you think so lightly of human nature. Is there no such thing as disinterestedness? Are all our actions prompted by self?"

"Miss Sybil! I am not going to listen to any more of your scientific principles. You are all head and no heart, and have given your soul to animals" (laughing). "I have not forgotten that."

"I do not understand you."

"I daresay not. You have no soul. Oh! no; nor I either. Souls are only given to lions and tigers," and she laughed amiably.

"I am glad you are a convert," said Sybil, good temperedly.

"Oh, I shall believe anything after that, even that you love that sweet innocent which you are holding in your arms. Though I should like you a great deal better if you told me you would like to poison him, it would be more natural."

"How can you say such cruel things, Mrs. Marshall?" Sybil was for the moment carried out of herself. "But never mind" (caressing her little relative), "you and I understand each other better, don't we Angel Georgey?" (his name) "and we will love one another through thick and thin."

Mrs. Marshall's quarrelsome fit ended not here, for her next antagonist was her son-in-law, who, opportune for the occasion, entered the room.

"I must say, Robert," she began, "I do dislike this half-and-half. If you could not get two peers, I would not have had one.

You might have been the first godfather, and any one would have done for the second."

"Ah! I see I am nobody. The rogue has put his father's nose out of joint. I am quite out of his grandmother's good books."

Unfortunate man, he was putting his foot in it, with the opprobrious term "grandmother."

"What bears people do become when they get their—"

"Cubs," suggests Robert.

"Proper name for them," answers his mamma. "Everybody is nobody then ; since that cub—thank you for the name—since he has come, it's not the same house, nor you the same—"

"Bear, of course ! I am unbearable now ; all your fault, boy ! What have you done to get out of granny's good books, too ?"

"Pray, Robert, be a little more polite ! Granny, indeed ! Don't teach the cub to call *me* that. It will be 'old granny,' next ! Did I ever hear anything so vulgar ! Granny !"

"I see I have lost Mrs. Marshall's good opinion for my presumption in standing beside Lord D——. I must try and make amends."

"Don't make unfeeling jests, pray! I do not like it! If you would have taken my advice, and written to Lord Caerleon, you might have had him for the second, and it would have been a sight worth seeing."

"What would? The little man with his four requisites? I am afraid he is out of your reach, and I am sure he is out of mine."

"You make me blush to hear such nonsense. I only wished it for your son's sake."

"Why did not you write, my dear Mrs. Marshall? I do not know him!"

"For shame, Robert! as if a lady could do such a thing to any gentleman, much less to a great man like him!"

"I thought he was a little one; but people see with different eyes. As to my boy, I think he is well off for his sponsors. My Lord D—— is the finest fellow living, and with his own father, and first and foremost, his dear

and affectionate sister, he has bail enough to satisfy anyone."

Sybil's eyes filled with sympathetic tears.

"And we will defend him, papa dear, with our lives," said she.

"There," returned the grand man, "with such a daughter, and with such a son, and such a wife, and so amiable a lady for my *mamma*, where is he I would change places with? God, I thank Thee!"

CHAPTER XLII.

BLINDFOLDED.

A LULL of some duration succeeded the christening, during which the small hero of it throve surprisingly.

Sybil could not but feel that the old house was all the brighter for the little presence, and as he grew in intelligence, and learned to distinguish her, she felt it some object on which to lavish the tenderness, full to the overflow, in her woman's heart.

She rejoiced also to have time for reflection, and to find that she was able to reflect calmly.

With Mr. Church she was offended, she considered he had no right to interfere between her and Mr. Bertram, although he might have been prompted by solicitude for her safety ; she might have added, and by jealousy that his rival should be more fortunate than himself, yet to lift her down was more than she had intended granting to Mr. Bertram, though it would have been more allowable in him, whom she had chosen for her protector.

In her heart of hearts Sybil congratulated herself that Mr. Bertram's greater *empressement* that evening had arisen more from manly sympathy for her in her altered position, than from real love.

She had feared him the most, feared being carried away by a vivacity of temperament, his usual quiet bearing had not led her to suspect in him.

In these higher moments she felt that if he had before hesitated to approach her as a lover, he would hardly do so now ; and, un-

less taken by surprise, it was the last thing she would or could do to accept him, or anybody else,—not even the chosen of her heart, were he now to appear, so much had she changed with change of circumstances.

Mr. Church, conscious of his misdemeanour, kept aloof for a time, and when he considered he had done all reasonable penance, he came again. His mistress turned very exclusive; she was oftener invisible than visible. He loved difficulties, and it suited his mood, and he could not, nor would he, allow himself to be overcome.

Finding all his efforts fail to produce any relaxation of her coldness towards him, he changed his tactics, and soon Sybil was at ease respecting his intentions. He was distant as she, and it seemed a tacit understanding between them that the amount of words passing should be as few and concise as possible. Still he came on one pretence or another; Sybil was certain it was not on her account, and could not but see that Mabel appro-

priated his visits to herself. She, at least, was always ready to receive and entertain him; and her desire to be on good terms with him, and make his visits pleasant and agreeable, must have struck the blindest.

Our heroine could not reconcile this with the slighting terms she always used in speaking of him, especially to her; and he was more frequently the subject of conversation than any other person. Had she been silent, it was not Sybil to impute sinister motives to her.

"Sybil, my love," addressing her, as they plied their needles, "have you and the Daddy long-legs quarrelled, that you are tongue-tied in each other's presence?"

Miss Sybil had become wonderfully experienced from constant intercourse with the fascinating Mabel, and could draw and defend almost as well as herself, when forced into action. She was often tempted to hate herself, and the cause that made dissembling necessary, when, naturally candid, all would

have been open and confessed between them.

"Mr Church and I have so little in common, that it would be difficult to find a subject for quarrel," she answered.

"The silent lovers, then? How interesting! (laughing). I should like to know how the gentleman makes known his sentiments on such occasions."

"He looks them."

"Looks are not to be trusted; besides, they may be misinterpreted."

"Novices they. Not practised in the game, like someone I know, not a hundred miles off."

"Byestanders are said to see more of the game than those who play."

"You parry cleverly. I know that of old. Perhaps Mr. Church is jealous."

"Jealous, dear Mabel! of whom?"

"Mr. Bertram, most likely."

"Mr. Church is too sensible for such nonsense."

"Nonsense?"

"What is there to be jealous of?"

"A great deal, I should say, from what I saw the last time he was here."

"A month ago! Mr. Bertram must be the absent lover."

"You see him at church."

Sybil laughed wickedly.

"That's nothing! if the length of the way here is too much for him."

"He looks at you a good deal."

"A cat may look at a king. I do not see him."

"Nor speak to him, when he waylays or hurries out after you?"

"Then he is the silent lover, for our conversation could be put in a nutshell."

"And his watching you in the distance till you are out of sight is nothing?"

"I give it up;—he is a distant lover, and these different characters are not to be placed to my account."

"Yet I promise you, justly or unjustly, they

are, and you are accused as the cause of his looking so ill, and the change that has come over him."

"Lady Clara Beverley rather. She is much more likely, as you have frequently said."

"I have changed my opinion about that. I am sure the young lady distinguishes him, and the want of spontaneity is on his side."

Sybil was dumb.

"I set it down," continued Mrs. Blake, "that you give him no encouragement, and he believes your affections are engaged," and she fixed her eyes upon her, as though she would look her through.

Sybil turned scarlet.

The girl considered she alluded to the past, and feared her father might have forgotten his promise of silence respecting it.

Mabel changed colour at the sight of Sybil's discomposure.

"Guilty," thought she, but said aloud—

"He thinks you prefer Mr. Church, and hesitates to come forward."

Sybil went on with her work, but still kept silence.

“And he is right, I believe.”

And if looks could kill it would have been all up with Sybil, who was intent on cutting off the end of her thread; but it was not the thread of fate as yet.

“Yes,” continued the tender friend, as much abroad on Sybil’s affairs as she was on her own, “I do see that you like that mountain of conceit after all! That cut-and-dried, formal piece of machinery.”

And she gave a forced laugh.

“He does not come to see me, I feel sure,” said Sybil.

“Who then does he come after?”

“I cannot tell. I ought to ask you, for he always converses with you.”

“What do you mean, Sybil? Of course he pays court to the lady of the house, or how would he gain admission for the prosecution of his designs, whatever they are, if she was not agreeable?”

"It would be as well if he did not come so often."

"Are you the mistress here, Sybil, that you dictate to me what I ought or ought not to do?"

The question did not deserve an answer, as no one knew better than the propounder of it.

Sybil would not descend to the denial of it, and said quietly that Mr. Church was the best judge of his own actions, and she was not interested to know, and she rose to leave the room.

"You are as much changed as any of them, Sybil," said Mabel; "so exceedingly sensitive of late that one can scarcely speak but you take offence."

"That's by no means a recommendation," returns the other, smiling good temperedly, "I really thought our *tete-à-tete* at an end."

"Time it was, I'm sure," answered the mother-in-law. "You perhaps wonder why I am so interested about your liking Mr. Church?"

"I have not given it a thought, I assure you."

"But perhaps you may, and, therefore, to prevent misunderstanding, I will candidly give you the reason. I have always hesitated to do so, believing that you entertained, unconsciously, perhaps, a preference for this man. You start! A modest regard, as befits my pure and gentle Sybil; and I did not wish to wound you, but as you tell me he is an object of indifference to you, even dislike—"

"Did I say that? I was not aware I spoke so strongly."

"Perhaps not those very words, but still I understood such to be your meaning."

"Dear Mabel, I think it will be best for me to be silent, for I have generally found that all endeavours to remove errors, accepted and acceptable, only end in making confusion worse confounded."

"Ah! Sybil. Is that intended for me? And am I too late? So late that truth will be neither accepted nor acceptable?"

"Is truth so very ugly, then?"

"Oh! dear, no. It is only its possible effect upon you. You will do me the justice, I think, to acknowledge that I would not willingly give you pain."

"I hope you will put me out of the question. You rouse my curiosity, and while listening to the tale of horror, I will resume my work, to divide my attention, lest I be too overcome."

"What a noble girl you are, my dear. I am not surprised Mr. Church is so enthusiastic in your praise."

"Spare me! if you do not wish me to become fascinated by Mr. Church's praises."

"True!" replied Mabel. "It is dangerous, and Mr. Church is dangerous; he captivates by those very qualities that are most repellent in him. There is something fascinating, to use your own term, in that cold and lofty exterior; that cynical stoicism, which makes you measure every word before you utter them, knowing they will all be weighed in

the balance and found wanting. I will confess that at the time when even he was my avowed lover, I could not overcome a certain awe of him."

"And was he ever your avowed lover?"

"Did you not know he was? Surely I told you."

"You mean just before papa and I left Ringwood, Christmas before last, when we were decorating St. John's?"

"Was it then?"

"I never remember any other time, and his attentions, I understood then, to be distasteful to you."

"For all that he was my avowed lover, and a famous one he made; a little *de trop* at times."

"Why was it broken off?"

"On a nearer acquaintance I discovered flaws, and you know the moment I find *them* it's all over with me. I like everything perfection."

Sybil laughed at the manner, not at the matter of the subject in hand.

"I suspect the flaw in Mr. Church was papa."

"You little monster, I had no idea you were so deep."

"If we only wait," says Sybil, with a wise look, "we shall come to the real character of everyone in time."

"You are a model of wisdom, I declare."

And she gave one of her customary satirical laughs.

But her companion did not wince, and her insensibility to ridicule disgusted the wily manœuverer.

"You must let me give you a word of advice, my dear," says the pleasing instructor. "Hide, as you value your peace of mind, hide your superior intellects from the eyes and ears of the men, or they will turn tail, and run away from you."

"Are men as timid as sheep, that a reed shaken in the wind can scare them?"

"Sybil turned censor? Upon my word I shall turn timid, and run away too. I do feel dreadfully small, and am shocked to

think what nonsense I have been pouring into your sensible ears ; but I need not, I am sure, ask you to keep silent on the subject of my confessions ; they were not intended for anyone else's ears."

"Certainly," responded Sybil, "though I fancy the most important part of the confessions have been left out, perhaps as too tender for your confessor's ears."

"For shame, Sybil ; you take the shine out of me by the profundity of your intelligence. You are gifted with inspiration."

"The force of language can no further go, and I give it up. My depths are shallows to your own profundity."

"Sybil sarcastic for once in her life," said Mabel. "Well, my love, as you surmise, I have wandered from the path in which I set out, and the point I aimed at has not been attained. What I really desire to know is whether there is any understanding between you and Mr. Church?"

And she gave one of her most scrutinizing looks.

Sybil laughed and said—

“I should say yes; there is a decided misunderstanding between us.”

“You have quarrelled then?”

And Mabel spoke quickly.

“No word has passed between us.”

“But people don’t grow distant towards each other for nothing. He has offended you?”

“Perhaps I have imbibed some of your awe of him.”

“I do not feel assured of you yet. But still I ought not to hesitate to warn you that it is not in accordance with strict propriety, and it certainly detracts from the high opinion of Mr. Church’s character I have always entertained, that he should, if he really has a serious idea of it, address himself first to the mother, and then to the daughter. It is not correct; least of all in a clergyman.”

“I cannot see that.”

"You shock me, Sybil. I thought it would only be necessary to point it out, for you to see it instantly, and I really feared to pain your delicacy."

"But in the first place you are not my mother, and in the next were, I believe, never really engaged to him."

"Was I not?"

"I never knew it."

"But that is no reason."

"No; but—"

"Ask him, since you doubt me."

"I suppose it was while we were in town."

Mabel became all at once deaf, as people often do, when disagreeable questions are asked.

"Who broke it off?" asked Sybil presently.

The lady recovered her hearing.

"Ask him, I say again!"

"It is not likely I should do so. But what was the cause of it?"

"Oh! he shall give his version first, and when he has done so let me know, and I will

give you mine. Then we can compare notes, make corrections, &c. &c."

And Mabel laughed as though she thought it the most amusing thing in the world.

CHAPTER XLIII.

CHESS.—KNIGHT CHECKS QUEEN.

IF asked who was the most important person in this our simple story, the reply would be, that amiable lady Mrs. Marshall; she even takes precedence of those two interesting little creatures her grandsons, the children of her daughter Mabel, the two youngest of our heroes, although the first numbered the years of his life by minutes, and his brother, more fortunate (?)—who can look into futurity? be content! he is blessed in the present—and counts his young life by the months.

The last time their grandmamma appeared in these pages the main-spring of her temper had got out of order. We left her on quarrel bent, and if she could not find any one to second her she was resolved to try till she did.

Her first fling was at her infant grandchild, for being a boy; the next at his sister for encouraging him, not but she suspected this pretence, for how could she believe that so great an affront could be perpetrated, and not be resented with open arms, as it was, though in a different way.

She waged war to no purpose with her son-in-law; she could not get him to give her battle. She was scarce more successful in a sort of fencing match with her daughter.

“She was shocked at her making that poor girl look so ridiculous. Every one would call it unfeeling, to see her made the god-mother.”

The daughter after her own heart pacified her, when she assured her that she considered it the best joke she ever heard of. It

was not her doing, and had she ransacked her brains for a month she could not have found anything half so absurd.

Failing to accomplish a quarrel with the powers above stairs, she turned the screw upon those below—figuratively, for they were on the same level practically, and theoretically in their own opinion, and Mr. Blake's band of retainers were in open revolt.

"The man who did the butleerin," as his disappointed admirer, Mrs. Butcher, styled him, gave his master notice to leave. "He was going to change his condition," was the reason assigned; but to his friends, "there was never no standing that there old Marshall, as was as cross as two sticks from the day as she was born till the day as she died. The missus was precious sharp, but now as she was laid up, and the old one has took the lead, there ain't never no living."

Mrs. Butcher flared up.

"It's more nor she'll do, to be turnin' of her tee-totums on me! Jist let her try, and see which ain't master!"

"Ah! luckless speech! and bootless boast!"

"Cook," says Mrs. Marshall, with great dignity, anon, "I ordered the fowls to be boiled yesterday, and you roasted them."

"Yes'um," and Mrs. Butcher looked ready.

"Why did you?"

"Because I knows my place!"

"Is it your place to disobey my orders?" was the natural query of the lady, somewhat taken aback by the coolness of the enemy.

"Yes'um, it is, when them as gives the orders know nothink about it."

"You are impertinent, Mrs. Cook, and I shall inform your master of your behaviour."

"May be so," returned the warlike Mrs. Butcher, "but I knows my place, and it's a dooty as I owes to me, as is perfessed, to do nothink wronk nor onbecomink, and them fowls was that gone, as they wasn't fit for no bilin'.

"Then you ought to have asked *me*, your mistress now, who is the best judge, and not

take upon yourself to do things out of your own head."

"I knows my place, and don't want ne'er a one to teach it me, as is perfessed, and them as has never had no perfessed, from the hour as they was born, till the day as they died, as the butleer-man says, and doesn't know how to comport 'em."

"Mrs. Butcher," says the deputy ruler of the *ménage*, with extreme 'comportmint,' "I have listened to see how far your impertinence would carry you, and I now give you notice to quit my service this day month."

"Thank you, mum! and I hopes afore as the month's is up, as I shall have a missis as isn't that strange in her comportmints, as there isn't never no pleasin' her, try as you will, not if a angel came down a-purpose to do her cookink."

And the ladies parted in mutual disgust.

"Mabel!" says the lady of the upper forms, "I have given cook notice to go, her impertinence is beyond belief, and she makes

it a point to do just contrary to what I tell her."

"You did very right, mamma! It is what I have long wished to do myself; but—I would not confess it to everyone—positively the vixen has made me half afraid of her."

"That's more than I, or anyone else could do, my dear," returns the admiring mother.

"Mother, love, you must not tell such naughty things of me to my baby here!" says Mabel, with maternal pride, "or he will not think his mamma perfect."

Mrs. Butcher's version of the story somewhat differed, as versions do differ when related by the parties differing.

"I'm a-goin' to gi' up here," was the announcement of the lady of the bowdoor to her astonished friends and fellows. "I did not exackerly mean to do it when I begins, but I grows hot at the 'colleckshins of her persecutink ways, and I thinks it war better as we should part. You should a seen how the old lady drawed in her horns when I denounced my attenshins. I warrant as she'll

be a-beggin' o' me, on her bended knees to stay wi' her. Not me! I don't stay wi' nobody as I can't comport, an' she ain't got a rack nor a rag o' comportmint in her."

As if to confirm Mrs. Butcher's statement of affairs, Mrs. Marshall's teetotums ceased all of a sudden, just as her distemper seemed about to fall on the Ringwood dogs and cats, the four-footed race being less likely to dispute her authority than the two-legged kind.

Mrs. Marshall became so excessively amiable, that really cook's lively stretch of imagination, about the bended knees, did not seem so very far-fetched.

We must, however, rob the gentle Mrs. Butcher of her laurels, and state the fact that the change wrought in Mrs. Marshall was due to a mightier magician than she.

"'Twas love, the little wicked sprite," in the shape of a letter from the Lord Caerleon, and ran thus—

"MY DEAR MADAM—

"Had the letter you have done me the

honour to address to me, about assuming the duty of sponsor to the infant heir of Ringwood reached me in time, I might for this once have departed from the rule I have hitherto rigidly observed, that is, of refusing to undertake so great a responsibility. The office has been solicited of me from time to time, by some of the highest personages in the realm, but I have invariably declined the office as incompatible with the freedom of thought and action, so necessary to my career as poet.

“Your letter, directed to my seat in Monmouth, was forwarded to me here in town, and came to hand the day the young gentleman was christened: a day sooner, and I might have telegraphed my intentions. As it was, it was too late, and I can only trust that Mr. Blake was not disappointed, and was able to find a fitting substitute. Will you, Madam, undertake the necessary apologies to him, and say all that is kind, respecting my wishes for the future of the young heir; while to yourself, I cannot fully express the

regret I feel that your kind efforts in behalf of your protégé should not have met with its due reward.

"I herewith forward a copy of 'Byron Redivivus,' apologizing for the delay between the promise and the performance, but the fact is, I expect in the course of the winter, to be in the neighbourhood of Ringwood, and had promised myself the pleasure of being the bearer of the volume so much appreciated.

"May I request the favour of a line, to say that you have received the book? and trusting that I may have the pleasure of seeing you when I pay my respects to Mr. Blake,

"I remain, dear Madam,

"Faithfully yours,

"CAERLEON."

It would require a more eloquent pen than ours to do justice to the feelings of Mrs. Marshall on receipt of this.

The earth was changed; she no longer

looked at it with jaundiced eyes. She trod again the garden of love—for the fiftieth time we should say, rather. Hers was not the aloe of other people's, blooming once in the centenary of their lives : It must have been a variety of the plant ; the Yucca perhaps, for it blossomed repeatedly, though strange to say, the lady herself always declared it to be the genuine aloe, and that it never bloomed before.

In the pride of her heart, she could not forbear proclaiming the success of her application.

To be sure it had an alloy, owing to her excessive anxiety, as to the perfection of the missive charged with her fate, she had been too late in despatching it, or who knows, if a first meeting had produced such havoc in the heart of a nobleman, a poet, and a bachelor, confessedly on the look-out, what might not have been the effect of a second interview ?

She reproached herself dreadfully, and

if nothing should come of it all, she would have only herself to blame, for throwing away the brightest prospects ever opened to any woman!

Still her letter was a success; "and he would have done it for my sake! The dear noble man!"

"Read that! see this!" and she laid the open letter, and "Byron Redivivus," with superb triumph before her daughter.

Mrs. Blake obeyed the first injunction.

"Upon my word, Mamma! you are coming out strong! We shall have you Lady Caerleon before long. See there, Robert!"

The Major-domo was ensconced in an easy chair in the study, where the trio were assembled.

Briton-wise he was intent on his "papers," which he could not have lived without; he did not restrict himself as to numbers, and might have been described as the man, with the "Times" in his right hand, "John Bull" in his left, the "Globe" under

one arm, "Atlas" under the other, the "Standard" over his shoulder, and leaning against a "Post."

He had finished his "Times," and was busily engaged unfolding his "Standard." The large-hearted Standard! May his banner never be furled!

He had been transported by the wand of the great magician to lands beyond his ken; had heard their cry, mourned their wrongs, nor heeded aught that passed within the narrow boundaries of his immediate surroundings.

Finding him so inattentive, his wife laid the letter on the "Standard," just turned and folded, right on the interesting paragraph destined for his next delectation. Aroused from his abstraction, he looked at it with a bewildered air: he could not understand the enigma of his little son's christening, nor connect it with Lord Caerleon. But when the light broke upon him, he was certainly more moved to anger than either his wife or mother had seen him before.

"Mrs. Marshall!" said he, "you cannot have written to Lord Caerleon, and made use of my name, surely?"

"You told me to do so, Robert," she answered.

"I told you! I tell you to write and ask a favour of a man I know nothing of? You have lost your senses."

"For all that, you told me to write to that great man, and ask him to stand godfather."

"I do not remember a word about it; and if I did, it was said in jest, and to silence your nonsense."

"Nonsense! And see the beautiful letter he has written; it would move a heart of stone. You have no gratitude."

"You could not have done anything to annoy me more. Did I know you were in correspondence with Lord Caerleon? You should know better. You will end in making yourself ridiculous."

"Really, Mr. Blake, I do think you owe me a little more gratitude, after doing everything I could to promote your son's future prospects."

"Will you do that by making his father appear snobbish and contemptible? I would not have asked my Lord D—— but for his long and steady friendship towards me; and surely he is a host in himself, and quite honour sufficient for our boy, however much *we* make of him."

"You could have had Lord Caerleon instead," said she, poutingly, "if you had left it to me. See how sweetly he can write?"

"Take the trash away!" and he pushed her treasures contemptuously away from him.

"Trash, indeed!" and Mrs. Marshall's fancy roses were finished off by the hand of Nature.

"You place me in an awkward situation," he continued;—"I must countenance a falsehood, and sanction by my silence an act I scorn and despise, rather than betray your indiscretion. Anyone else, I would write and disclaim all knowledge of the application made in my name."

Mrs. Marshall gathered up her belongings, and swept out of the room with an air

worthy of a coronet, which she already saw suspended over her head. She had the tender epistle to console her for "Robert's bearish behaviour," and then there was the book of books, "Byron Redivivus."

But her feelings are best portrayed in the reply requested of her by the noble poet.

"MY DEAR LORD CAERLEON,—

"It is with sentiments of the deepest gratitude that I offer my best thanks to your lordship for the priceless treasure you have bestowed on me in the 'Byron Redivivus.' I received it yesterday, and from that hour to this have been rivetted to its pages, so fascinating are the exquisite poems with which it abounds. I assure you, my lord, that in the whole course of my life I never shed so many tears as I did over that sweet and pathetic story of 'the Drowned Rat'—

' No more you'll squeak,
Which stands for speak,
And nibble and gnaw my cheese;
Your hairs are all wet,
Your teeth are all set,
And drowned are all the poor fleas.'

“Poor rat! poor fleas! I am sure they would not have minded being drowned if they had known your lordship would write those affecting lines on them. And then again, at page 58, anything so beautiful was never before written—

TO GERALDINE.

‘ When I behold those starry eyes,
Across your lattice shyly looking,
And when they see me turn away,
As if I was not worth the booking—
I feel all o’er, I don’t know how,
So small, so weak, so done all over,
A feather’s blow would lay me low,
And end the days of your poor lover.’

“ I venture to hope, my lord, that no lady has ever been so wicked as to behave so to your lordship. She had only to see that wonderful and beautiful book, and she would have fallen down and worshipped your lordship. All last night I sat like the lady Geraldine of old, reading the precious volume by the light of the moon, tears pouring from my eyes, at the tender melancholy of many of the divine poems, the true sign of genius.

“ I have delivered your lordship’s message to Mr. Blake, and he wishes me to say that

he will feel highly honoured by the visit
your lordship is so noble as to promise him.

“ Again thanking you,

“ I have the honour to remain,

“ Your lordship’s humble servant,

“ CLEMENTINA MARSHALL.”

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE JUNGFRAU.

WHATEVER end Mrs. Blake's confessions were intended to accomplish, they did not certainly redound to her credit, in her confessor's opinion.

This last could put two and two together as well as most people, and casting up past accounts she arrived at the nearest of the sum total of facts, as could be obtained from circumstantial evidence.

To continue the metaphor, the deficit in the balance of credit was unhesitatingly placed

to the account of the lady, for, as the fair numerator truly considered, whatever were his faults, Mr. Church was an upright man, and too proud to have been guilty of dishonourable conduct towards man or woman. But knowing Mabel as she did, it was more than she would have affirmed of that clever and fascinating lady.

But this latter cared not one pin for the good or bad opinion of her confessor. She had gained the victory over her; there was nothing more to be obtained in the matter of worldly superiority, and could she succeed in preventing her marrying Mr. Church (she had given up Mr. Bertram as an enigma) she would be free to indulge in the most unqualified contempt for her.

Had Sybil been like herself, and waged war against her and her baby, and have fled her father's house, she might have felt some respect for her.

This was Mabel's belief, but her historians doubt if it would have made a particle of

difference that way, while it would have added very considerably to her gratification. For Sybil it would not have been so well in the long run ; whereas now her gentleness, her patience, and forbearance found their reward in the respect and admiration of those who knew her.

The information vouchsafed to Sybil of the engagement between Mr. Church and the erst Mrs. Forster, was not likely to produce any relaxation of the coldness she had for some time past exhibited towards that gentleman.

He, unfortunate man, had believed that latterly he had perceived some symptoms of a thaw, but when he next appeared he was almost frozen by contact with such an iceberg.

She did not avoid him, or show tempers ; she was calm and even cheerful, but with a certain demeanour, difficult to describe, which made him hesitate to approach her, and feel also, as Mabel said of him, " he must measure his words, for they would be weighed in the balance and found wanting."

Mrs. Blake stood out in grateful and graceful relief; he did not choose her to see his mortification and extreme depression, and she believed he answered her in the same spirit, and was weary of Sybil and her airs.

She invited him into the garden, "where no doubt they would find her husband, he was busy about his shrubberies, cutting and pruning as though it was his vocation."

He accepted the invitation as a relief to the ice-bound fetters which chained him to the spot, and he rose to accompany her.

"You are coming," said Mabel, turning to her step-daughter, as she moved to the door.

Mr. Church turned quickly, anxious for her reply.

"Thank you," was Sybil's answer, "but I think I must not go out just at present."

The cloud fell like a veil over Mr. Church's face, and Sybil could not doubt him.

But the engagement! and Mabel his past love!

She had none of the "missy" notions

about first love and its strength and durability, oftener weak, evanescent, and puerile, despite its freshness, and which men and women in their later age are wont frequently to forget or laugh at. Indeed, it is customary for them to assert on each successive fit, that their *present* is their first love, and they never truly loved before. Like Mrs. Marshall and her aloe.

It was not with Sybil, the love past and done with, which influenced her in her judgment of Mr. Church. It was the object of it, still working, still interposing its baleful self between what should have been pure, true, and beautiful.

Was not Mabel married to one of the best of men, one whom she had plotted for, and proved herself most unprincipled and artful in the means she took to obtain her ends? She was mother of a lovely infant to complete her happiness, to concentrate her affections, and call forth the highest and holiest with which our nature is endowed; yet she

could lay herself out to captivate another man; dress for him, look for his coming, watch his departure, as in days when such evidence of the all-absorbing passion was legitimate and natural.

This Sybil had been witness to repeatedly, an unwilling witness, and much as it shocked her, she felt certain that Mr. Church was not blind to it, but rather seemed to entertain it, and showed no sign of repulsion.

Sybil would not think ill of Mr. Church, yet, considering all things, how recent had been the engagement, that it was Mabel's, not his own act, that broke it off, and he had felt it severely from what she had learned; she could not but feel he ought to act differently.

"Oh, papa! papa!" was the lamentation of her heart. "Is this your reward? Is honour and virtue dead? Could I do so? God forbid! May His glorious sun set to me for ever, ere I become so sinful. Nor could I live, and doubt the truth of him to whom I

have given my whole soul! Can body and soul live asunder? No! rather let me flee the face of man, and live for God, and God only."

END OF VOL. II.



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